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MORE THAN CORONETS

MRS. G. LINNÆUS BANKS

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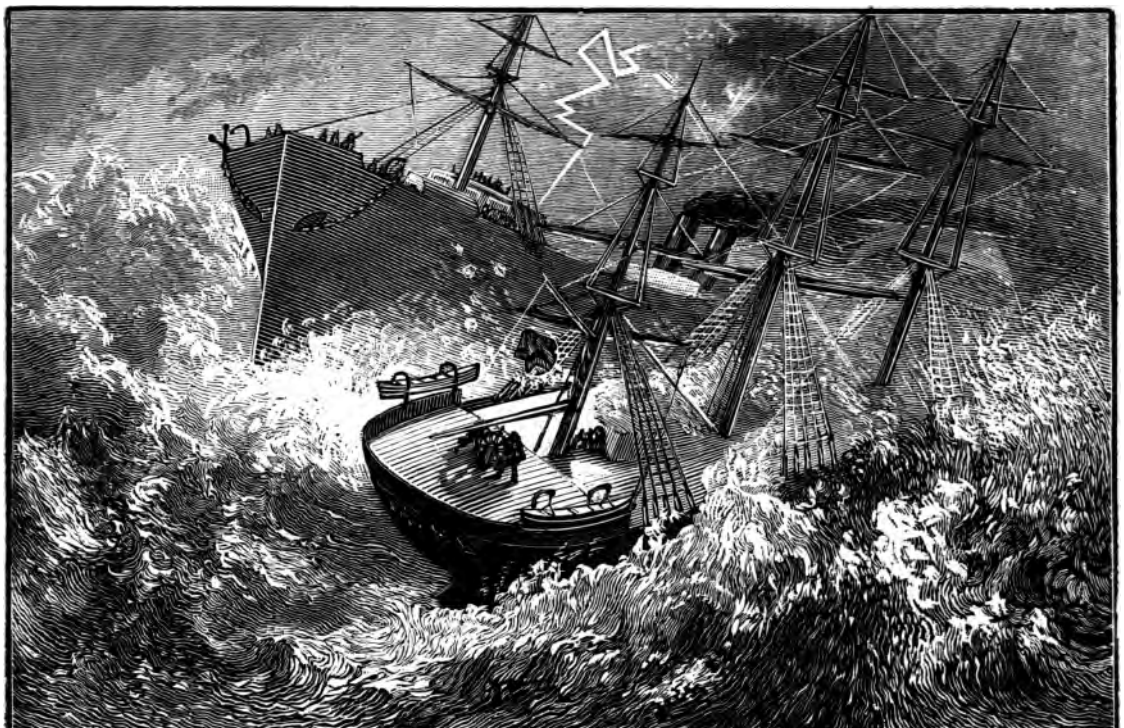
MRS. BANKS'S NOVELS.

UNIFORM SERIES.

MORE THAN CORONETS.



"ON THE WINGS OF THE WIND."

MORE THAN CORONETS.

BY

MRS. G. LINNÆUS BANKS,

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MORE THAN CORONETS.

CHAPTER I.

AT HOME.

CAPTAIN STAPLETON was the impersonation of the typical English sailor—frank, fearless, hearty; strict in discipline, firm in command, but tender at heart as a woman, and, what I am afraid is not so typical, he was a man of sober habits, and a practical Christian.

He was careful in the selection of his crew; overhauled the certificates of his A Bs and his officers with the most rigid scrutiny: a man with a doubtful character was not for his ship; and—reason good—the *Ariel* was his own, and much of his trading was on his own account, although the bulk of his cargoes consisted of consignments from well-known shipping houses.

He was only first mate of the new ship when he married Fanny Bayliss, a pretty but delicate girl in her twenty-first year, whose parents were both dead, the distant relatives with whom she lived being glad to hand her and her small portion over to one so worthy, so capable of protecting her from the blasts of ill fortune and of the world, his seven or eight years' seniority telling in his favour.

The sailor took his bride home to his widowed mother, who had a pretty and picturesque cottage near Woodside, on the Cheshire side of the Mersey, over the front of which jasmine and honeysuckle disputed precedence, and where Brian's father had practised medicine all the years in which his son had grown from youth to manhood. Dr. Stapleton's widow received her new daughter with open arms, welcoming her as a companion who had shown good taste and good sense in loving and accepting her son, the only rivalry between the twain being which should love him most devotedly, the only disquiet under the roof coming

when the winds beat against the window panes, tearing down jasmine and honeysuckle, as if to tell what mischief they could work far out at sea were they so minded. At such times the two anxious women would go down on their knees together, and pray for their dear one on the ocean as if they had but one heart, one voice.

But when the sun came out in all his glory and pomp, filling the earth with gladness, they were glad too, and made their gladness felt by those around them. Fanny Stapleton herself was too shy and timid to make many fresh acquaintances; but the doctor's widow had, besides a visiting circle of her own class, a humbler circle amongst the poor gratuitous patients of the departed doctor, to whom she had been a helpmate in more ways than one. Amongst these the kind old lady generally went alone, Fanny finding more congenial occupation; but when at home together they sat down to needlework or their afternoon tea, she would chat away pleasantly to a never-weary listener of the bygone times when she was a girl, or when she married, or when Brian was a boy and first had a craving for the sea—as fresh-looking, cheery, and chatty a mother-in-law as ever kept a young wife from morbid fretting in her husband's absence.

And was there ever a woman under fifty so proud of being a grandmother as was she when the *Ariel* next sailed into the port of Liverpool, and the Woodside ferry-boat brought the sailor-son home, to clasp in fond arms not only mother and wife, but two little warm links of love, twin boy and girl, in whose lineaments he could trace a faint shadowing of his own! And was there ever a grandmother so little jealous as she when, the boy being named Brian, after his father, Fanny Stapleton proposed to call the girl Hesba, after that Grandmother Bayliss whom none of them had known, for not even Fanny herself could remember her mother, so young was she when her orphanhood began!

As though all promotions came together, before he again set sail the owners of the *Ariel* offered to her chief officer the command, with the proviso attached that he bought a retiring partner's share in the good ship. He had the means, and snatched at the opportunity.

Dear to the man were wife and babes, dear to him was his ship, and now he trod the deck as her captain, a new right which came with his command made itself felt. He longed for

the presence of his beloved Fanny on board, not only to lighten the tedium of the voyage for himself, but under the impression that the sea breezes would strengthen her constitution. Yet the claim of the twins was imperative, and for that voyage the idea had to be abandoned.

Voyage succeeded voyage, some long, some short; the children flourished, and the *Ariel* brought its master home in safety, only the more urgent to carry off his wife; but grandmother always stoutly opposed the scheme on account of the little ones, and it was relinquished with better grace than might have been looked for.

Then, after an unusually successful trip to Singapore, and an absence lengthened by stoppages at different trading stations on the route, Captain Stapleton made overtures to the other owners to buy up their shares, and the offer being accepted, the ship *Ariel* became his own. It was well built, a fast sailer, stood A 1 at Lloyd's, and, as his friend Robert Mason, the marine insurance agent, could have told, stood well with the underwriters, who did not hesitate to insure her and her cargo to full value.

And now Captain Stapleton would take no denial from his wife, had she been inclined to oppose his wishes. The children were between seven and eight years old, had got fairly through their infantile ailments, and he proposed to leave Hesba with her grandmother as a companion and a solace, whilst Brian—promoted to a full suit of sea-boy's clothes—should bear them company, "to see what sort of a sailor the little chap would make."

Dr. Stapleton had planted in his garden, on either side of the entrance gate, a vigorous young larch, and the trees had given their name to the old brick cottage, which at that time stood apart from neighbours in a rural lane, where the thrush and linnet piped in their season; but since then stuccoed villas had sprung up and around with the brand of the builder fresh upon them, and Birkenhead threatened to blot out Woodside. But the good garden kept Larch Cottage a green spot in the wilderness of plaster, and the doctor had small reason to grumble at encroachments, since new houses meant new patients, and he did not live until the last linnet and thrush disappeared. He did, however, live to see tokens of his sailor-boy walk into the low-ceiled rooms, whether in Hindoo slippers, Chinese shoes, or Indian mocassins. Brazilian feather-flowers and humming-birds

exhibited their glories in the sitting-room, whilst a shark's jaw and a stuffed cayman found their way into the doctor's little study. The collection had gone on gathering since then until every nook and corner of the house told of a wanderer on the face of the globe. The model of a Chinese junk stood upon the piano in the drawing-room, on the opposite side of the wide hall, of course under a large glass shade; there was a piratical proa under another on the chiffonier, with a birch-bark canoe beside it; a fine representation of the Nankin Porcelain-Tower in soapstone had the place of honour on the mantelshelf, and was flanked by a couple of hideous idols of like material. What-nots and side boards were crowded with nick-nackery in the way of china, carvings in wood and ivory, calabash bottles, baskets and boxes embroidered with grass or wampum, and the hall was hung with weapons of uncouth or murderous construction, the horns of the bison and the gnu. Last, but by no means least, though this was merely a specimen of English art, and not art in its maturity, on the wall above the rosewood piano, and in striking contrast to the Chinese junk thereon, appeared a large oil painting of the *Ariel*, with not a spar or a line deficient or out of place, and with every sail set. On this "painted ship upon a painted ocean" the portraits of the late doctor and his wife smiled blandly from out their heavy gold frames on either side, as if well satisfied.

Such surroundings, strengthened by the illustrations in an old quarto edition of "Cooke's Geography," in which "Captain Cook's Voyages" were incorporated, had impressed the youngsters with wondrous notions of far-off lands, and a belief that the end and aim of a sea voyage was to discover new islands and to bring away "curiosities."

So, when it was understood that mamma was going away with papa, and that Brian was going also, the boy did his little best, in the midst of the excitement and bustle of preparation, to soothe the prospective agonies of parting with promises of the rare and precious treasures he would pour into "dear sister Hesba's" lap on his return, little foreseeing the gift he would bring back to her; and it was scarcely until the last moment that they realised what parting meant.

Hesba and Brian were taken together to Liverpool and the docks one bright September morning, where the *Ariel*, in all the glory of fresh paint and burnishing, with the bulk of her

cargo stowed away, served as a delightful playground for them whilst the vessel cleared out into the river.

But no sooner was it made clear to Hesba's understanding that she was to be sent ashore with grandma, and that Brian was then, even then, to go away in the big ship, and that her mamma was also going, and that she "would not see them again for ever so long," than she began to scream and sob alternately, and clung to Brian's neck, refusing alike to be bribed, comforted, or coerced.

Captain Stapleton, who had a crew of able-bodied seamen at his beck and call, had a new experience. He found there was something there he could not control with a word. He had not counted on the strong affection of the twins, and as they held each other close, refusing to be separated, a pang smote the tender spot in the father's heart, and he half regretted his proposal to sunder them. Nevertheless, he endeavoured to stifle his own emotions.

"It is only for a few months," he reflected, "and it is quite as well they are parted early; the lad would have to go out into the world later on, and then they would feel it more. Besides, the lad might grow up a milksop, tied to his sister's pinafore-strings. They will get over it in a day or two. And it will never do to encourage a child's disobedience on my own deck."

So thinking, he, with his strong hands, unclasped the twining arms of his children, saying as cheerily as he could, "Come, you little mutineer, it is time you kissed mamma and said 'good-bye,'" and, lifting the struggling Hesba in his own arms, held her for the mother's tearful embrace, and, in defiance of screams and struggles, carried her off to the quay, leaving Brian, almost as refractory, in the hands of Robert Mason, who was going down the river with his friend Stapleton, intending to return with the pilot.

The father's heart ached as he left his little Hesba, still sobbing piteously, in a cab with her grandmother, whose tears were flowing freely too, though she had had so many partings in her day that she had learned to take them as the will of the Almighty, and to rest on Him her hopes for reunion.

She had a wonderful way with children, had grandmamma Stapleton; and though a very limp little maiden, much disordered in the matter of dress, was lifted from the cab on to the Woodside ferry-boat, there were no further signs of rebellion, and only

occasional sobs to indicate that her small heart held a large sorrow.

Nor did Hesba forget Brian so readily as her father anticipated. It was impossible to mope in the presence of the elder Mrs. Stapleton, and childhood is naturally elastic; but nothing at school or at home would compensate Hesba for the loss of Brian, and whether at work or at play, there was a perceptible lack of that buoyancy which was so marked a characteristic of both.

In her prayers night and morning, beyond her petition for papa and mamma, was always a special plea for Brian, and, as days and weeks and months went by, she counted and calculated with some mental arithmetic of her own, and as if instinct told her that her frequent inquiries gave grandma pain, she carried her anxious questionings to the maids, to be answered crossly or kindly according to the mood of the moment, or the maid she addressed.

Her greatest solace was a book; and books were plentiful, the accumulation of more than one lifetime. There was the "Looking Glass of the Mind," a series of moral stories, with quaint illustrations by Bewick, which had been her great-grandmother's; there were "Readers," and "Speakers," Mrs. Trimmer's "Robins," and Mrs. Barbauld's "Evenings at Home," all of which had passed down from the same feminine hands; whilst Mrs. Sherwood and Mrs. Hofland had contributed to the store in her grandmother's young days. Then there was wonderful "Robinson Crusoe," and the "Swiss Family Robinson," but they were about shipwrecks, and she did not like to read of them. And there were books rather beyond her comprehension—the whole "Library of Entertaining Knowledge," the "Penny Magazine," and a stock of "Voyages and Travels," which were turned over often enough for their pictures, and might insensibly educate through the eye; others there were, a goodly collection, old and new, free to the child's hands. True, she had to mount upon a chair to reach the shelves, and had more than one fall; but what of that, Hesba did not care for a bit of a tumble in the pursuit of knowledge; and she had set forward, child as she was, in a race with time to "get learning," albeit it was from an innate craving to fill the void left by Brian rather than from any definite purpose. For this she was too young.

But she was not too young to be curious as Bluebeard's wife,

and long for the unattainable. Beside the open shelves in the sitting-room was a book-case in the study, with glass doors, which were always carefully locked. This contained the private library of the late Dr. Stapleton, chiefly medical and scientific.

Now and then she had seen her grandma open the case, take down a book, consult it carefully, replace, and lock it up again; but as this had generally happened when someone was hurt or taken ill, either in the house or among the poor she visited, and as it sometimes chanced that on these occasions her grandma produced a tiny pair of scales from a small mahogany box, and weighed out brown, or white, or grey powders, for someone to take, perhaps herself, she began to associate the books with medicine, and think the knowledge how to cure all ailments lay behind those glass doors.

One day an old woman with an asthma, to whom Hesba and Eliza, the housemaid, had been sent with a decoction of herbs, wheezed forth that the mantle of Dr. Stapleton had surely fallen on his good lady, and that she was a blessing to the neighbourhood. This set Hesba pondering, but she went for the solution to her grandmamma, who laughed right merrily as she gave her explanation.

It was not until later years, however, that Hesba learned how true a benefactress Grandma Stapleton had been to the poor of Woodside—the healing balsams dispensed so freely for sick bodies, with knowledge imparted by the physician, her husband, having been accompanied by healing balsams for sick souls, under the teaching and inspiration of the Great Physician.

Meanwhile the locked book-case was a marvel and a mystery to her, and just as she wondered if she would ever be as clever as her grandmamma, so she wondered—but this was more painfully—why Brian and her mamma were so long in coming back to them.

CHAPTER II.

AFLOAT.

We left Brian on the deck of the *Ariel*, struggling to release himself from the grip of Mr. Robert Mason, his father's friend; a man with a thin white face and a coal-black head, a sharp, thin, prominent, aquiline nose, a small mouth, with close thin lips, and a firm chin—a handsome man, had it not been for the two long, thick, black bushes which stood out over his deeply-sunken, close-set, penetrating eyes, bushes which gave the beholder a notion of a bare, black, unbroken ridge, or hedge, between two snow-covered fields, so nearly did they meet above the nose, so far did they extend below the temples. His linen was as white as his face; his broadcloth always as black as his head. He was no stranger to Master Brian, and no favourite of his.

He might have known it; for the white, sinewy hand held the boy's arm like a vice, held it longer and tighter than was at all necessary, since there was no chance of escape for the boy, and once convinced that his sister was gone and beyond recal, he would have rushed into some obscure nook to have his cry out by himself, where no one could see his tears, just as his darling mamma had gone to the cabin below with hers. But the hand that held him hurt him; hurt his flesh, wounded his spirit; he no longer cried "Hesba!" but "Let me go!" and looking up, Brian saw a smile on the handsome face set in its frame of bushy black hair, a smile of amusement and conscious power. Almost at the same moment Brian's contortions brought his toe in contact with Mr. Mason's shin, which might have been much more tender than the little fellow's arm, he shook the boy free with so angry a jerk and so involuntary an ejaculation of pain.

For a moment the two looked at each other, the child and the man, and the impression left on either by that momentary look was never to be obliterated.

Brian's tears were gone. His arm hurt him, but he had been taught that it was not manly to cry for pain; and he was too proud to complain to his mother, so he betook himself to a solitary post of observation in the stern, and turning his face up the

stream the better to hide the smart of heart and arm, made a pretence of watching the traffic on the river and the quays, the various ferry-steamers crossing and re-crossing, wondering which was carrying Hesba and grandma home, until at length a pilot-boat came alongside in which was his father, and then he felt himself safe and got down from his perch.

A kindly pat on the head, a cheery "All right now, my brave boy?" were all the father had leisure to bestow, but they sufficed. Brian returned to his elevated seat much more content, and now he watched the novel scene around him with some interest.

Bare-breasted, bare-footed sailors, with tarry hands and trousers, busied in stowing away cases and packages late in coming aboard, began, as the pilot sang out his orders to mates and men to haul in anchors and cables, to set the helm, mount the rigging and shake out the white sails to the wind. There was a clanking of iron, the dull thud of cables on the deck, a general creaking and groaning, a confusion of voices, and figures passing to and fro, and then the good ship was fairly in motion, gliding swiftly out with the outgoing tide, and bearing him farther away from sister Hesba.

It was some consolation to be with his mother and father, only he hoped that Mr. Mason was not going along with them; and, whilst ruminating and speculating as children do, and watching the washing of the waves along the ship's sides, and the frothy trail she left in her wake, he began to feel as if he were in a swing, a swing that would not stop to let him rest; there was a sense of unsteadiness in everything about him; he thought either the sailors or himself must be turning upside down; he made an effort to stand, but his head seemed to turn round. He fell on the deck fully convinced that he was dying, and then his father's strong and tender arms were around him; he was carried down into the cabin, laid upon a berth, close to his mamma, was given in charge to Mrs. Ball, the wife of the ship's carpenter, and was so ill that he lost all hope of seeing Hesba any more.

Brian recovered from the horrors of sea-sickness long before his mamma, and when he crept on deck again, he found that the sun was shining overhead, the sea shining all around, and the land nowhere. He discovered, moreover, that the pilot and Mr. Mason were both gone, whereat he felt infinitely relieved.

His satisfaction at the deliverance found somewhat singular expression. Holding by his father's hand to steady himself, he remarked abruptly, "I should not like Mr. Mason to be *my* papa!"

With a comical twist of his sunburnt features, Captain Stapleton asked, "And why not, Brian?"

"I don't think he likes little boys!"

At this the light-hearted captain laughed immoderately, breaking out afresh when the first fit had subsided, whereupon Master Brian withdrew his hand from his papa's in much discomposure, though he was glad enough to clutch at the bulwarks, against which he staggered, to hold himself up.

It was no laughing matter to him. Indeed, he felt his judgment impugned and his dignity affronted; when, half-an-hour later, the captain left the ship in charge of Mr. Conyers, his first mate, and taking his boy down into the cabin reported Brian's wise saying to his wife as a capital joke (Mr. Mason being regarded as a confirmed old bachelor, who never had been in love, and would never marry), and that even his mamma, ill as she was, should look amused, and say, "What funny ideas children do get into their heads, to be sure!"

He did not see that there was anything funny in it.

Meanwhile, there was a fresh breeze, fair skies above, smooth seas below, the ship slipping through the water as though she was alive and knew the precious freight she had aboard; a hopeful looking forward to a speedy run, a prosperous voyage, a talk fore and aft of good omens and bright auguries, and all going merrily as a marriage bell.

Even Master Brian, having recovered his equanimity, tried to steady himself on deck and become friendly with the men; and there were hopes his mamma would soon be able to come on deck.

But on the fourth day the wind shifted, the breeze strengthened to a gale, and it took all the captain's seamanship and vigilance, taxed the energies of officers and crew, to keep the *Ariel* clear of the fateful Cornish coast.

Then the wind abated somewhat, veering round in their favour, and Captain Stapleton found leisure to go down into his cabin and re-assure his terrified wife and son.

Another morning dawned, wet and squally, and they made little headway. As the day advanced, the grey clouds which

had flecked the sky gathered into heavy purple masses, and night fell before its time.

With a sudden sob and a shriek the gale was down upon them, tearing and riving with unseen and envious fingers at the only sail left to its mercy; churning the Biscayan billows into froth; threatening the shuddering *Ariel* with destruction as she pitched and reeled, dipped her bowsprit in the foamy brine, then rose upon the crest of the wave, only to dive again and fight against the storm that drove her landward.

And now bold-hearted Captain Stapleton would have given all he was worth to have had his darling wife and son safe in the Woodside cottage; for another danger threatened. As the first lightning flash leapt from the sombre sky and lit the gloom, he saw a large steamer, evidently driven out of her course, bearing down upon them.

Collision seemed inevitable. What prayers went up from his agonized heart, even whilst his breath sent orders through his trumpet that were scarcely to be heard, so fierce was the raging blast.

And now, to be prepared for the worst, the boats were got ready to be lowered. Up from the cabin wife and son were brought, chilled to silence with affright. Yet, ere a boat left the davits, another flash revealed the steamer, her deck crowded with people, her position shifted a point or more. Collision was less imminent. The two vessels were still perilously near, but they now lay alongside, with their heads in opposite directions, and Captain Stapleton breathed freer. There was less danger of being cut down amidships.

Yet—a sure token of proximity and the fierceness of the gale, which might any moment crush them together like walnuts—caps and bonnets, ends of cable, tarpaulin, and splinters came with the force of missiles from the steamer to the ship, and did some damage in their flight.

Bryan and his mother, crouched upon the deck, unable to keep their feet, with the carpenter's wife beside them supporting the lady with her stronger arm, prayed for deliverance as if in the face of death. There was a momentary lull in which the two commanders strove to communicate; but as if to mock them a terrific gust swept whistling through the shrouds, tearing down spars and rigging, and hurling in Brian's face a great bundle of something which stunned the little fellow.

It seemed as though a shriek came from the labouring steamer, but it might only be the wind, and of the bundle deposited amongst the small group on the *Ariel's* deck none knew but themselves. Indeed, but for pressing on Brian's face it might have lain there unheeded; the boy touched something softer and warmer than his own benumbed fingers in its removal, and fancied he heard a cry as if a little child was gasping for breath.

Astonishment got the better of fear. He thrust his hand into the bundle, and wee soft fingers closed upon his own.

In amazement he cried out, "It's a baby, mamma! A live baby!"

Yes, torn by the tempest from whatever arms had held it, under the warm folds of the big shawl which had first caught the wild wind, then served as wings to waft her across the seething abyss, an infant lay half-stunned and smothered.

At once the womanly instincts of Mrs. Stapleton and Mary Ball were aroused. Personal danger was for the moment forgotten. The former, prostrate with exhaustion and dread, roused as the new marvel came with a shock upon them.

"Oh, the poor mother!" was the first thought of each. The child was safe, safe at least as themselves, and as they held to each other for security, so did they cling to the bundled form that was more dead than alive.

Ship, cargo, crew, wife, and child depended on the captain's vigilance and skill. He was at his post thundering his orders forth amid the warring elements. Nothing knew he of the stranger in their midst. Barefooted sailors tramped here and there; one man threw over them a piece of sailcloth to protect them from the drenching seas that swept the deck, but the strange bundle passed unnoticed, and there was no hearing a feeble wail in the rush of winds and waters.

Fiercely the storm continued to rage, yet with a devoutly thankful heart Captain Stapleton first fancied, then grew assured that the lights of their threatening companion had not only shifted their position, but grew gradually dimmer with increasing distance.

"Thank God! all danger of collision is past," he said to his wife an hour later, when he first felt himself at liberty to snatch a moment for a word of comfort. "The gale is slackening, too, the ship obeys her helm again, and we do not hug the shore

so closely. You had better all go down to the cabin. Immediate danger has gone along with the steamer."

"I am afraid inexpressible anguish has gone with her, Brian," answered his wife, sadly. "Look here!" and as the covering sailcloth was slipped aside, the bundle was exposed, and the light of a ship's lantern fell on the beautiful face of a girl at least sixteen or eighteen months old nestling against Brian's, both wet with brine and tears. "This was blown by the wind into our Brian's arms!"

"A child?" he cried, aghast. "What miracle is this? Poor babe! it was a mercy for thee we were so near. How inscrutable are the ways of Providence! That which we were striving with might and main to avoid has been the safeguard of this little innocent. Had the vessels been farther apart she *must* have dropped into the sea and been lost. As it is, we may possibly be able to signal the steamer in the morning and restore her. But I cannot loiter here. You had better all go below. James Ball will help you. And Brian," said he, lifting the cramped-up boy to his feet, "see you take care of the pretty dove God has sent you, or she may fly away again."

There was little need to tell the boy this. Wet and shivering though he was, he would not consent "to be made comfortable" until convinced that baby was warm under her many wraps, and as fast asleep as if no storm had raged, no heart-strings rent asunder.

CHAPTER III.

LOST.

MORNING dawned on less tumultuous waters, but the sky was still thick and hazy. The *Ariel* seemed to cut her way through a thin grey mist, and when towards noon the sun withdrew the veil from his face, there was abundant evidence of the storm in floating wreckage on the waves; but, far as Captain Stapleton's glass could sweep, was no sign of the large steamer which had so nearly cut them down.

True, the *Ariel* was bound south and the steamer heading north; but the man of large heart could not account for the steamship keeping on its course, if commander or passengers knew that the child lost to them was safe on board another craft in the same waters.

"No, Fanny, my dear, it is quite clear the little thing is given up as lost," said he to his wife, whose indignation at the apparent desertion of the child, if feebly uttered, was that of a true woman and a mother. "It was blown overboard we know; but in the pitchy darkness who but ourselves could dream that it had not dropped into the billows and perished. None but a madman could have jumped overboard to save it in such a sea, with two great hulls so perilously near. The captain would have surely signalled had he or anyone aboard a notion the little piccaninny was alive and with us. All was confusion on their deck, I saw, as she shaved our stern so closely, and I'd a notion there was something up with her engines to put them in such a fright. I'd no idea then that a little cherub had flown to us for shelter and protection. God comfort the poor father and mother, whoever they may be!"

Mrs. Stapleton, overcome by the terrors of the night, was lying in her berth, when her kind-hearted husband came to make his report. As he spoke of the child's parents she sighed heavily; her own lone orphanhood was not forgotten. "Ah, yes, poor things, they will feel it dreadfully and always. The little girl can hardly know her loss now; it is in after years she will feel it most."

"Nay, nay, Fanny, all depends. If her owners are to be found, I'll find 'em; and if not, why, Larch Cottage is big enough to hold her, and neither you nor mother are the women I take you for if you let her feel her dependence as she grows up. As for Brian, he has taken to her wonderfully."

"Well, dear, I should think her people would be easily found if you advertised; for the pretty darling certainly belongs to *somebody*. Mrs. Ball says that if she were a little princess she could not be better dressed, so fine and daintily trimmed is her linen, so beautifully embroidered is her white frock, so rich her ruby velvet coat and satin hood. All her underclothing is marked with a monogram, and the clasps that fasten up her tiny sleeves show the same monogram enamelled on pure gold. Oh! they are exquisite. And feel this shawl. It must have been snatched up hastily to wrap around her in the fear of collision, for it is real cashmere, and too costly for common people." And, wearied by her long speech, which had nevertheless fallen in languid gasps from her pallid lips, Mrs. Stapleton sank back exhausted, and the captain rose to depart, when Master Brian burst in upon them with a flushed face, and the little girl, whose tottering footsteps he made a vain attempt to steady by the hand.

"Papa, did not God send *her* to *me*, to be *mine, my very own?* Mrs. Ball says that she belongs to someone else, and I shall have to give her up when we go on shore, and I *won't*!

"My dear," replied Mrs. Stapleton very gravely, "you must not say that. Her mamma will want her back."

"Then I don't think she does, or she would have held her fast, and not let the wind take her."

"Brian, dear, some mammas are not strong, and God's winds are stronger than the strongest man or woman. You will have to give her up when her father and mother are found."

"Then I hope they will not be found!"

Whereupon Master Brian, who had some ado to steady himself and his charge, was about to beat a retreat, when his father lifted the wind-blown waif in his arms and, with a kiss, asked her name.

"She calls herself 'Baby,'" answered the boy. And, as if in corroboration, the pretty pouting lips whimpered, "Baby wants mamma;" but, being brought to a level with the languid

lady in the berth, demonstrated very plainly that she was not willing to accept a substitute.

By this time Mrs. Stapleton, on whom the terrors of the preceding night had told seriously, was utterly overpowered. She sank down in a fainting condition. Mrs. Ball was summoned, and "Baby" was put down on the cabin floor to crawl about on all-fours, at once a playmate and a plaything for Brian.

In a few days "Baby" ceased to cry for her mamma, and made herself thoroughly at home in her new quarters, notwithstanding an occasional bump, for which Brian consoled her with kisses, as proud to be her guardian as Hesba might have been of a book or a new doll.

In those few days, Captain Stapleton, who was kept much on deck by baffling winds and squally weather, saw little of either his wife or the children, who would have been in sorry plight but for good-natured Mrs. Ball, a fisherman's daughter, on whom the rolling and tossing of the ship made little or no impression.

It gave him great pain when he did come below to find how weak and prostrate his dear wife continued, and how indifferent she appeared when he made a suggestion that "we had better call the little lass 'Mercy,' as a memorial of her merciful and miraculous preservation," feeling assured that her apathy arose from no want of motherliness or humanity, but was a proof how very detrimental was the sea voyage on which he had built such sanguine hopes.

Fanny Stapleton's system had received a shock from terror and exposure, following close on excessive sea-sickness, and squally weather was not calculated to restore her. She was seldom able to leave her berth, and all active care for Brian or Mercy fell on Mary Ball, at which no one lamented more than herself.

At Madeira, Captain Stapleton would have left his wife behind in a doctor's care, but this she opposed with all the strength she had remaining. She was afraid she would die among strangers, and never behold husband or child again.

And so, much against that husband's altered judgment, wife and son remained on board to suffer all the discomforts of a protracted and hazardous voyage, and to encounter in the Indian seas a tornado to which the storm in the Bay of Biscay was as nothing; when topmasts snapped and rigging tore away like twine, when all was confusion above and below, and only a miracle saved the *Ariel* from the bottom of the sea.

Who shall tell the brave man's compunctious visitings as he uttered a resolve never to suffer wife or child to cross the seas again.

"It is my vocation," he said; "I cannot change it, but it shall never be my son's."

On that son a nameless horror seemed to have fallen; brave, fearless to recklessness in all other respects, his reluctance to re-embark at the Cape, where the *Ariel* had stopped to refit, was manifest, as was his eager restlessness to be once more at home with Hesba. And it was not all due to his love or his fears for little Mercy, though the way the poor thing clung to him and he to the child was something remarkable, and Mercy's danger, and the bumps she got all unconscious of it, were more pain to him than any knocking about of his own. But towards the end of their long voyage his *protégée* had learned the free use of her feet, and accommodated herself to the roll of the vessel better than her teacher.

Glad were they all when a brisk March wind carried them past the lighthouse on the formidable Black Rock, safe up the Mersey to the port of Liverpool; glad were they all to feel themselves at home once more; glad were the homebirds to welcome the sea-birds back to their nest; and great was the wonder and rejoicing of Hesba over the fledgling brought back; "a new sister actually blown into Brian's very face by the wind," as Hesba proclaimed to the maids in the kitchen and to her young schoolfellows out of doors.

He had kept his promise, and brought her wonderful Chinese toys, tropical sea-shells which had stolen the tints of the rainbow, and a carved work-box which rivalled her mamma's; but he had brought no curiosity so charming as the wind's contribution—Mercy. Even the extreme delicacy of mamma could not damp the delight of petting and patronising the pretty new playmate, who stood in some danger of being as much spoiled on land as she had been on shipboard.

Many were the advertisements Captain Stapleton framed and inserted in different newspapers during his stay on land, but no parents or relatives were forthcoming to claim their lost child, now about three years of age. At last Captain Stapleton came to the conclusion that the steamer, which had evidently met with some disaster, must have foundered during the night. Had she run aground some tidings would have been received at Lloyd's. He heard, too, that a steamship was reported "missing"

about that time. He ceased to advertise, and little Mercy, who was too well cared for to know aught of her own desolation, took her place in the family to be caressed and indulged, and claimed by Brian as his own exclusive property; and but for a nursemaid introduced for her especial behoof, and that of the delicate lady, she would have grown up in ignorance of her dependence.

She knew no parents but those of Brian and Hesba; and when Captain Stapleton once more went back to his ship and the sea, after the vessel had been thoroughly overhauled, she was by no means the least reluctant to part from him.

Yet his wife, still a sufferer from the one voyage, hung upon his neck more loth than ever to let him depart; for did she not now know by experience that of which she had before only a hazy notion. And he himself went aboard with less vivacity than of old, though his faith in the *Ariel* and in the great Ruler of sea and land was more assured than ever.

From that voyage Captain Stapleton never returned.

He was known to have landed a cargo at Hong Kong, to have shipped a return cargo of tea and silk, to have touched at the Cape and at St. Helena; but nothing more was ever seen of the *Ariel* than floating tea-chests, a boat keel upwards bearing her name, and a sailor-boy on a plank who died soon after he was picked up, and told that his captain had gone down with his ship.

She was gazetted at Lloyd's as "Lost with all hands," and the Woodside cottage was filled with weeping and lamentation.

There was other lamentation besides that of the bereaved relatives.

Mr. Robert Mason's sorrow was almost as deep, and had a twofold origin.

As a man, he grieved for the loss of his bosom friend. As a *business man*, a marine insurance agent, who had outstepped his limit, and turned underwriter for once on his own account, he grieved, after another fashion, for a loss which would tell heavily on his credit and his balance at the bank.

He had negotiated the insurance of ship and cargo with others, it is true, but his own private venture was a full half of the whole sum, and he would be called upon to make the loss good, without delay, for the benefit of Captain Stapleton's heirs and creditors.

Who were the executors? He felt assured that himself would be named as one; the drowned man had no closer friend that he knew of; in that case, might he not contrive to pay the insurance money at intervals, or defer it until more convenient to himself?

But was he an executor? That remained to be seen.

No man could have been more respectfully attentive to the widow of a dead friend than was Mr. Mason at this time.

Fanny Stapleton, who had not yet recovered from the ill effects of her own long and disastrous sea voyage, succumbed under the fresh shock, and abandoning herself to grief was incapable of thought or action. She would call the three children round her, clasp them in her arms, weep bitterly over their helplessness and orphanhood, then dismiss them from her presence as so many additions to her poignant anguish.

Of business she was utterly incapable, and to her Mr. Mason's offer to relieve her of its details, and save her the expense of a solicitor, was a benignant act calling for grateful thanks.

Now recurred the question of executorship, and how far he was empowered to act by the will of the dead; for a will had assuredly been made and lodged in the hands of the elder Mrs. Stapleton for safety.

And now, too, ensued a hunt for the will.

Old Mrs. Stapleton (she was not so very old, by-the-bye) was convinced she had placed it in a drawer of an antique oaken bureau along with other papers. This bureau had held Stapleton papers and other articles for many generations, and at its escritoire-flap the late doctor had indited his first love-letters and his latest contributions to the *Lancet*. It remained in the little room he had been wont to call his study, and in which *his* widow kept her small store of drugs and other appliances for gratuitous distribution under lock and key.

A will there assuredly was, and the seeker knew it; but, although she ransacked the bureau from end to side, no will was to be found.

CHAPTER IV.

DINAH SMART.

Not to be found!

Mrs. Stapleton's hair was silvering rapidly; she pushed back the smooth braids from her temple with one hand, and paused to think.

Her habits were methodical; she was not likely to have misplaced or removed the document. Her memory was good, and she distinctly remembered placing it in a small drawer at the top of other papers, along with her son's life-insurance policy.

It was most perplexing. The policy was there, but not the *will*.

Mr. Mason was down stairs. He and the afflicted young widow were called up into the little room. Two black studs in his white shirt front symbolised his mourning—all the addition he could make to his ordinary sables, save and except the black band upon his hat which hung in the hall. She, from the white cap upon her head, the black China-silk shawl upon her shoulders, to her crape-covered skirt and tear-stained face, was the embodiment of woe. Far less impressive and significant was the black frock of Hesba, who followed in their wake, drawn thither more by the attraction of the stoppered bottles on the top of the bureau than any special interest in her father's will. What do children, barely ten years of age, care about wills?

Old Mrs. Stapleton explained her bewilderment and its cause Again were drawers and pigeon-holes emptied and ransacked, without success.

"I put the will into this drawer, Fanny, I know, the very day before our poor dear Brian set sail. Alas! that he ever went! He had made it at my request;" and as she spoke, with quivering lip, she laid her hand upon one of the small drawers in the upper portion closed in by the sloping flap.

"It is very singular!" and the tone of the white-faced man, not less than the wandering of his keen black optics, were expressive of mystery and dubiety.

"It is most unfortunate," murmured the young widow, plaintively, from the depths of the arm-chair on which she had sunk on her entrance.

"And most unfortunate," acquiesced Mr. Mason, like an echo.

"Do you think it has slipped behind, grandma?" asked Hesba, her curiosity roused.

Out came the drawer and the three beneath it; but there was not so much as an inch of paper to be discerned in any of the cavities.

"And you say you have never opened the drawer since?" pondered Mr. Mason, with his smooth chin pinched between his thumb and the forefinger of his closed right hand, his left hand serving as a support to the right elbow.

"I have had no occasion; as you may perceive, the drawer is filled with old legal documents, for which I have rarely any use."

"And no one enters the room but yourself?"

"No one but the housemaid to dust, and I am always present. Then the bureau is kept locked."

"Yes, grandma," put in Hesba, "Dinah dusted the room once because Eliza was busy helping to pack papa's clothes. Don't you remember she broke your magnesia bottle?"

"To be sure, child, so she did! It was the very day I put the will into the drawer. Your mamma called me into the next room, and though I was not away five minutes, when I got back the elfish creature was all in a flurry, and the green writing baize of the bureau was white with the magnesia."

Mr. Mason had a habit of half-shutting his black eyes, as if they could not bear the light. He did so now.

"Then you had *not locked* the bureau? I observe that you have quite an array of drug-bottles above it."

"I was called off hastily—had not time, or did not think of it. I was more afraid of my medicine bottles. And you see she broke one, though I was not away five minutes. Young girls nowadays have such slippery fingers," answered the good lady, not following the drift of his remark.

"Might it not be as well to summon this slippery-fingered Dinah, and question *her?*"

Three pairs of eyes turned upon him, and before her mother-in-law could reply, the young widow, who had sat passive during this colloquy, roused herself to say languidly,

"Hesba, dear, go and take care of Mercy whilst Dinah comes here. Say I want her."

Dinah Smart had been engaged as personal attendant on three-year-old Mercy and the nine-year-old twins, when a mutiny was caused in the kitchen by the return of Captain Stapleton with an invalid wife, and two children in place of one.

Grandma Stapleton had sighed over the degeneracy of modern servants, who thought everything of themselves and little of those they served; and it was not without a protest that she consented to add a third domestic to her small establishment.

Nor had she been too well satisfied with the specimen sent to her from the Registry-office, though she had admitted to her daughter-in-law she could scarcely tell why. There was not a speck or a stain, not a button or pin awry on the little maid, but there was a certain amount of dressiness suggestive of much time spent before a looking-glass.

"I object to so much cheap jewellery for servants," she had said.

"I cannot afford better, ma'am," had been the unexpected reply.

"Servants did not wear trinkets when I was a girl."

"Perhaps, ma'am, there was none cheap enough," had been suggested with cool stolidity.

Then Dinah Smart had put Mrs. Stapleton through a catechism, under which the genial lady's patience almost broke down, finally concluding that she "thought she would accept the place," whilst, on the other hand, the fear of being left utterly servantless had alone prevented her dismissal as "unsuitable," in spite of the excellent character she brought with her.

She was small, almost to dwarfishness, had a large head, and an elfish aspect which foreboded uncanny tricks, and was evidently vain of her plain face and diminutive form. Her age was not to be guessed between sixteen and six-and-twenty.

Yet she had some negative virtues, and her written testimonial was so far just. She performed her duties punctiliously; and though she went about her work at times with a sort of dogged sullenness, no one had occasion to remind her of a neglected task.

She stood now in the doorway in a black cotton dress, starred with white, with her hands folded demurely across her white apron, waiting until she was called forward.

"Dinah, you remember dusting this room one day when Eliza was busy packing?" put Grandma Stapleton, half affirmatively.

A statue opening its lips to say "Yes'm" could scarcely have been more emotionless, though she must have known she was not summoned to that room or so questioned for slight reason.

"And you remember breaking my magnesia bottle, do you not?"

"Yes'm," in precisely the same unmoved tone.

"What were you doing to break it?"

Sitting a little behind the younger lady, Mr. Mason, with his chin between his fingers and his elbow in his disengaged hand, watched the girl covertly from under his pent-house brows, and now he—but he only—detected a faint effort on her part to preserve the immobility of her mouth, as she answered, "Dusting it, m'm."

"You had been cautioned not to touch the bottles, had you not?"

A slight negative shake of Dinah's big head. "Don't remember, m'm."

"Why did I find you at the bureau when I left you dusting the table?"

You see, a slight hint had set the old lady's memory astir.

"Please 'm, I thought as I would take the opportunity to dust the bottles and bureau when you wasn't standing afore it, in the way."

"Ah, and where did you put the paper you took out of the drawer before the bottle was broken, eh, my girl?" interposed Mr. Mason, in a tone which implied, "It is no use to palter with me."

For an instant Dinah seemed taken aback, as if startled by the sudden interruption; then stolidly, doggedly, she replied, "I never took no paper. What should I do with papers? I broke the bottle, that was all as I did; and I couldn't help its being so slippy."

"You mean you broke the bottle in your hurry to hide the paper," suggested her new catechist.

A momentary flush crossed Dinah's dark skin; her elfish eye lit up.

"No, I don't; I never took no paper. What should I do with papers as can't read 'em? And you've no right to take my charackter away, saying I took papers or anything. A

He smiled as he asked, "And what of the new nurse?"

"*That* is what Mrs. Marbury says," and a letter was put into his hand.

He drew near to the table and snuffed the candles before he ventured on the letter. After skimming the contents he read aloud:—

"I hope, Mrs. Vaudrey, you will not treat poor Rosa as an ordinary nursemaid. She is very sensitive, and would feel it keenly. But, indeed, I know I may trust to your kindness, and that of Miss Jenny, or I should not have sent her. She is at present naturally much cast down; but will doubtless soon recover her spirits in your cheerful household. And I am certain you will find her a sensible, modest, and steady girl, one you can rely on."

"Worthy credentials from a worthy source," remarked James Vaudrey as he folded up the letter. "Mrs. Marbury's word is better than some people's affidavit. Where is the girl, and what is she like?"

He threw himself as he spoke on the ponderous black horsehair covered sofa at the door end of the room beyond the table, where he could catch the gleam of the fire, rest his limbs, and—listen. He knew he had set his wife's tongue going busily as did her glancing needle through the patchwork quilt.

He was a man of few words, she a woman of many. Their conversation was apt to be one-sided.

"Oh," she answered, "Rosa went upstairs with Jenny to put Amabel and Jack to bed, and has not come down again. I suppose Jenny is showing the girl where she is to sleep and place her clothes, and having a talk with her to make her feel at home." ("Just like Jenny!" thought Mr. V.) "I could tell you better what she is like if Amabel had not made such a noisy rush to kiss and hug us all, and had not been in such a hurry to carry her off to the kitchen and nursery. She seemed a slim girl about sixteen years old—I don't think she could be more—with a pale, pensive countenance and a sort of coffee-brown hair; but I could not see the colour of her eyes, they were so downcast. She had a good cloth cloak on over her black stuff frock, and her black cottage bonnet was trimmed with crape. Mrs. Marbury has sent her out very respectably indeed, considering!"

"Considering what, my dear?" put in Mr. Vaudrey, quietly, as he lay with his hands clasped behind his head on the sofa arm.

something fresh to tell her of her dead husband, something he had heard floating "on 'Change," and was at her service in great matters or small, she did not conceive that his visits could be less acceptable to others. As I have said, she never gave it a thought.

Others had thought and decided that the sharply-defined white face smiled more frequently in the cosy rooms of Larch Cottage than was at all desirable. The double-action of Grandma Stapleton's bright knitting-pins, and the arrested action of her genial tongue on such occasions, declared it.

The indignant protests of Brian and Mercy, on being hustled off prematurely from the paradise of the parlour to the isolation of the nursery, barely silenced by Hesba's hint of "poor mamma" into surreptitious grumblings on the stairs, might have proclaimed it.

And Dinah Smart's grotesque mimicry of the polished gentleman in black for the delectation of the nursery might have been an enlightenment to him could he have seen how his walk, his voice, his manner, his very tricks of speech and action were reproduced and caricatured; or how the drollery of the mimic stirred the laughter of the children.

Of its impression on them there could be no doubt, and as little doubt that she had watched him narrowly, and when least suspected.

On his part, Mr. Mason had kept as close a watch on Dinah, having a private opinion that the young woman knew more of the missing will than she was inclined to admit. All his many devices to surprise her into admission, however, were nullified either by her innocence or her cunning—he was not quite satisfied which. That he was baffled he admitted, but he did not believe in the girl, and still determined to watch her.

He also watched his opportunity to renew the subject of the captain's private books and papers, suggesting as delicately and adroitly as he was able that he would assist Mrs. Brian in going through them, or even relieve her of the mournful duty altogether if she thought the task would be too painful. He never suggested Grandma Stapleton as his coadjutor; but he said, "My dear Mrs. Brian, this is a duty you owe to yourself and to your children. It is your only chance of knowing what property my lamented friend had at his disposal, to whom he stands indebted, or who stands indebted to him. You require the documents to substan-

tiate a claim upon the underwriters for insurance—he surely would not carry those away with him. Yes, really, Mrs. Brian, you owe it to your children to ascertain, with as little delay as possible, the position in which you are left."

As if to make his speech more impressive, or in order that his low tones might reach the ears of the fair fragile woman in the cushioned chair opposite to him, on whom the emblems of widowhood sat so sadly, he had leaned forward in his chair; his arms rested on his knees, and his extended finger tips pressed closely against each other, as he looked in her pale face for an answer.

He found he had struck the right keynote at last. The claims of her children were paramount over all other considerations.

She had shrunk with morbid sensitiveness from the very sight of her dear love's handwriting, now that his hand itself was cold; and she knew it would rend her heart to see a stranger turning over and prying into his papers and accounts; but it seemed to be inevitable, and must be done.

It was with a very deep sigh she admitted this, saying, "You are really very kind to take such interest in our affairs, Mr. Mason; perhaps by the time you come again I may be strong enough to bear it. And there is, perhaps, no friend of my dear husband he would have been more likely to have committed so sacred an office to than yourself. But there is a padlock on the box, and the key——," and here she broke down, and buried her sobs in her handkerchief.

Grandma Stapleton, who made a nightly practice of hearing prayers reverently said in the nursery, and of seeing all snug and comfortable, little Mercy as well as her own grandchildren, entered the room at this juncture, and Mr. Mason took leave with his customary ceremonious politeness.

"I wish Mr. Mason would keep away," exclaimed Grandma, as soon as the door closed behind him. "Poor little Mercy has cried herself to sleep because she could not come down to kiss mamma before she went to bed, and when I return to the parlour I find you in tears also. He knows how sensitive you are, and a man of either common sense or delicacy would avoid topics calculated to distress you, and it is remarkable that you are always most depressed when Mr. Mason is here. What *has* he been saying to-night?"

The required information was given, as also the promise made by Fanny herself.

"Well, yes, my dear, Mr. Mason was quite right; it is imperative some one should examine poor Brian's accounts, but"—and the elder lady tapped on the floor thoughtfully with her foot—"I don't think Robert Mason is the right person to look over them."

"Why not?" and the sad eyes opened wide. "Was he not Brian's friend?"

"Well, my dear, he was; but it was a business friend, and there is no knowing what business transactions, with which we are unacquainted, might exist to disqualify Mr. Mason for so sacred an office."

"You surely would not infer that Mr. Mason is *dishonest?*—that he would take an unfair advantage of his friend's widow and orphans?" and Fanny Stapleton roused as if resenting an aspersion.

"Certainly not. But, my dear Fanny, commercial integrity is not what it was in my young days, and, without casting any imputation on Mr. Mason, who may be the very soul of honour for anything I know to the contrary, I fancy you might have found a friend nearer home, who had no business connection with Brian, and whose goodwill is undoubted."

"You mean Dr. Forsyth?"

"Certainly!"

Whereupon both ladies lapsed into reverie, and only the click of knitting-pins broke the silence.

Dr. Forsyth was a near neighbour, had been assistant to the late Dr. Stapleton, who, although an M.D., acted as a general practitioner, and at his death had dropped into the practice. He, however, was a surgeon, and was dubbed Dr. by courtesy. He had been a near and dear friend of the lost captain, and was little Brian's godfather.

CHAPTER V.

DINAH'S FINERY.

It had been dry and dusty for two or three weeks, but as though the skies had taken pity on the drooping leaves and the yellowing grass and the gaping cracks in the thirsty soil, down came the bountiful rain—not a sprinkling, but a deluge.

It was the day after Mr. Mason's last visit, and old Mrs. Stapleton, reversing all her ordinary habits, wandered about the house restlessly and aimlessly. She had her knitting in her hand, it is true; but though she turned the heel of a sock for Mercy as she stood by the parlour window, she looked up at the grey sky and the pelting rain, and down the gravel path strewn with petals of rose and marigold, and towards the gate where larch needles lay thick and green, more frequently than at her work.

The fact was, she earnestly desired to go out, and the rain—that enemy to crape—forbade it. For this was no common shower to be braved with strong boots and a waterproof, by anything wearing a bonnet.

It had not been advisable either to send the children to school, and, as may be supposed, they were making the most of their holiday, undisturbed by any of the anxieties which pressed on their elders.

Upstairs, alone in the nursery, Hesba, with a pair of tin scales, was busied weighing morsels of flour, sugar, salt, &c., into tiny powders, to be duly papered, labelled, and prescribed for the sick dolls afterwards, and she was quiet enough. But downstairs, Brian, who had wearied of sliding down the staircase handrail, and who had a skipping-rope between his teeth as bit and bridle, was prancing to and fro through the hall, obedient to the whip and "gee-ups" of Mercy, making as much clatter on the oil-cloth as one pair of boy's boots could accomplish.

Presently grandma's fresh-coloured face appeared at the parlour door.

"My dears, cannot you play quietly? You make your

mamma's head ache. What is Dinah doing that she cannot keep you in the nursery?"

"She is ironing some lace and ribbons to trim herself up for to-morrow. You know it is her holiday, grandma," answered Brian, whose race had come to a full stop.

"Yes, my dear, I know;" and grandma went back into the room to ring the bell, saying, as she crossed the Indian carpet, "Dinah takes care we shall not forget *her* holiday. She is the first servant who ever thought it necessary to remind me in advance when her wages and her holiday would fall due. She did so two days ago."

"Perhaps she means to be extra respectful," suggested her daughter-in-law, faintly.

"She has an odd way of showing respect, if that be so. To me it always sounds like an insolent intimation that she might otherwise be kept waiting for her money."

"Perhaps she has lived where her wages were problematic."

"May be so. In any case it is unpleasant."

The subject of the colloquy appeared.

"Dinah, take Master Brian and Mercy to the nursery. You know that noise distracts Mrs. Brian's head."

The quick ring of the bell had caused Dinah to scorch some of her finery. She had not, therefore, obeyed the summons either in too great haste, or in too amiable a mood.

"Yes'm," she answered, ere she closed the door. "Little plagues!" she muttered, when on the other side of it.

As she went back through the hall to the kitchen at the extreme end, she gave a sharp jerk to the skipping-rope reins.

It was quite a superfluous check, for Brian had by that time gone down on all fours, and was then quietly perambulating the passage with Mercy on his back.

He was on his feet in an instant. The sudden twitch had sent a pain jarring through his mouth and jaw, which was too much for his equanimity.

"What did you do that for? You spiteful, ugly little elf you! I did you no harm!" he cried, in his anger.

"You 'piteful, ugly, 'ittle ef! What you hurt Brian for?" echoed Mercy, doubling up her little fist, as if to strike Dinah.

Their nurse's eyes flashed, but she made no reply. Possibly the parlour door was too near, and she knew herself the aggressor.

"March off upstairs to your sister, both! Don't you hear?

You make your mamma's head ache," she cried, driving them roughly before her to the staircase, and watching them ascend, which they did without further demonstration, Brian holding Mercy by one hand, to help her from stair to stair, whilst she grasped the balustrades with her other small fingers.

Then, muttering inaudibly to herself, she went back down the secondary passage to the kitchen, where she expended so much irritability on the flat irons, which were perversely either "too hot" or "too cold," that at length cook, ignorant of any other annoyance, said sharply, "If you mean to grumble all morning over a bit of threepenny lace, I think you'd best carry yourself and your temper out of this kitchen. All your trumpery put together is not worth the trouble you are making over it."

Whereupon, in silent disdain, she gathered up the offending "trumpery," and carried herself and her temper just where she should not have carried it—into the nursery.

Hesba was still busy at the broad window ledge with her miniature powders and pills, now papering and labelling.

Brian, who from the very first had assumed a sort of proprietary right over Mercy, was seated on a low stool in the middle of the floor, drawing houses on a slate for the little one to copy after her own fashion.

Absorbed in their occupations, no one observed the entrance of Dinah, with her best black dress and the washed lace and ribbons over her left arm, or the careful closing of the door behind her.

A smart box on Brian's ear was the first intimation of her presence. The pencil made an involuntary zigzag line, which split the newly-drawn house from roof to foundation.

Up the boy started in surprise and stinging pain. Mercy scrambled to her feet, and Hesba was at her brother's side in an instant.

"What's that for?" demanded all three in a breath, Brian, whose ear and cheek smarted and tingled, standing at bay, with his nostrils panting and his large eyes on fire, whilst Hesba flung herself, as it were, a shield before him.

"I'm an ugly elf, am I? you young scapegrace! I'll teach you to call *me* names!" and again the hand was uplifted, and her black eyes glowed under her sullen brows.

"Keep your hands off me! You are an ugly elf, and mean-spirited to strike me when you know I can't hit you back as if

you were a boy," and his looks told plainly how he would have dealt with a boy who had so struck him.

Hesba, always the pacificator, interposed, "Hush, Brian, you must not call names. Mamma would be displeased; and, Dinah, an elf is a fairy, so that's not a bad name."

Dinah had a nursery acquaintance with fairy lore. "Yes, miss; but there's bad fairies as well as good fairies, and he called me an *ugly* little elf; UGLY!" and she bridled under the imputation, casting sidelong glances of admiration at her own image in a looking-glass hung on the wall. "And Jim Dobbs says I'm beautiful and 'as fair as alablaster'! 'A little beauty' he called me yesterday," and she cast another complacent glance at the looking-glass. "Ugly, indeed!"

Brian's anger was never more than a flash. There was something so irresistibly comical in the vanity of this little creature, craning her thin neck the better to admire the large head above it, that he burst into a fit of uncontrollable laughter, which Mercy caught up like an echo.

"Ha! ha! ha! He! he! he! Beautiful! Jim Dobbs! Why, I met him at the gate yesterday as I came from school, and he was laughing at you behind your back. I wouldn't be so silly, if I were you. Jim Dobbs knows you're ugly as well as I do!"

Dinah's dark skin flamed again. Jim Dobbs was the local postman, for whom she was angling with all the arts and charms she imagined to irradiate her small person.

Again Hesba interposed, "Now, Brian, do be quiet. You know grandma says that nothing is ugly but sin and wickedness; and there is beauty in all God's creatures, if we could but see it. And remember, mamma told you the other day when Willie Forsyth was here that Dinah cannot help being plain; she is just what God made her; and beauty is only skin deep. You have no——"

Plain! she plain! The words sank into Dinah's narrow soul. Hesba's well-meant interference had done more harm than good. There is no knowing what summary vengeance might have been executed had not Grandma Stapleton appeared on the scene.

Little Mercy had slipped downstairs unperceived to announce in breathless haste, "Dinah has hurted Brian! She has, two times;" and, although not given to encourage tale-bearing, Grandma Stapleton had seen something in the maid's face when

she answered the bell which induced her to take the child's tiny hand in hers and make inquisition for herself.

It ended for the time being in a homily to Brian on the control of his tongue, and a homily to Dinah on the control of her temper, and the sad consequences of personal vanity. But Dinah's belief in her own attractions was so real that the words "ugly" and "plain" had been worse than blows, and bruised deeper than the skin.

And Grandma Stapleton decided that the nursery would be better without so peculiar a personage, and resolved on her removal at the earliest opportunity.

What a change a few hours can effect! As though the previous day's rain had cleared the atmosphere within as well as without, Dinah was up in the morning betimes, and lively as the birds in the garden over their plethora of "early worms." She had the young people up and ready for breakfast long before the time, so as to allow her more leisure for consultation with her looking-glass. And very soon after they were off on their different ways to school she tripped down the path to the gate, having contrived to smarten up the black merino dress given by her mistress with a free use of violet ribbons and lace, as a sort of jaunty protest against mourning to order. She gave her head a toss as she closed the gate, and put up her parasol with an air which was at once ludicrous and pitiful in its self-complacence and assertion; and had either of her mistresses been observant, they might have seen that her wrists were garnished and adorned with ornaments which were utterly out of keeping, and certainly had no business there.

The young widow, inhaling the fresh perfume of mignonette and sweet-briar floating in through the open window, at which she sat trifling with a tatting-shuttle as she watched the little maid depart, remarked to the elder woman cutting out a garment at the centre-table, "Dinah seems disposed to make the most of her holiday; she is certainly on the best of terms with herself. Do look at the conceit of the little thing as she marches down the avenue."

"Oh, I know," said grandma; "she expects to fascinate the cabmen as she passes the stand."

Now, it must be understood, that Larch Cottage was one of several, separated by the grounds of a nurseryman and florist from the main road, on the opposite side of which were one or

two excellent shops for the use of the neighbourhood. Access to and from the road lay through a long avenue between tall privet hedges, terminating at the one end in a couple of gates—one large for vehicles, one smaller for pedestrians—and at the other in a broad, gravelled space, sacred to the exclusive colony. A stand for cabs stood conveniently close to the avenue gates.

Mrs. Stapleton the elder drew near to the window, not so much to watch the parasol bobbing up and down in its progress between the hedges, as to remark, "Yes, Fanny, she is on much better terms with herself than with the children, and, I think, now you appear to be getting stronger, it may be advisable to part with her."

"Part with Dinah!" was the exclamatory reply. "But the children?"

"Will be better without her, judging from the scene yesterday. Besides, Fanny, I think it will be only prudent to reduce our establishment, at least to its old footing, until you know how you are left. My annuity is not alone sufficient to maintain three servants."

"What will cook and Eliza say?"

"Grumble, no doubt; but if they do, they may go likewise. Now, don't look rueful, Fanny, we are not dependent on their whims now. Mercy is no longer a baby in arms, and I suspect Hesba does more for the little trot than Dinah does; to say nothing of Brian, who is a perfect slave to the poor motherless darling. By-the-bye, I opened the bundle of Mercy's belongings the other day, and gave the shawl a good shake for fear of moths. I showed the other children the pebble sleeve-bands, with the enamelled clasps, before I packed them up again in the parcel, together with a packet of camphor. And really, Fanny, I think those things ought to be placed in a secure place by themselves, along with a full statement of the child's miraculous preservation, signed by you, aye, and Brian, as the only living witnesses. Some day they may serve for her identification; and as she must have belonged to somebody of either rank or wealth, I do not think the nursery cupboard a fit place for such valuables."

Fanny Stapleton acquiesced languidly, and, whilst grandma's scissors snipped away, returned to the subject previously mooted —namely, the dismissal of Dinah, which ended in a postponement of the notice until the invalid was quite able to dispense with her services.

By way of favour, Hesba had taken Mercy with her to school "for that day only," and in the afternoon, Mrs. Brian expressing her willingness to be left, the old lady also took advantage of the sunshine, and, turning to the right when she quitted the avenue, soon found herself under a red lamp, which flamed in the sun like a huge carbuncle, and at the door of James Forsyth, Surgeon, as a brass plate intimated.

The doctor was not at home, but she seemed to be; for little hands pulled her into the presence of "Mamma," and pleasant Mrs. Forsyth greeted her with the heartiest demonstrations. Bonnet and mantle were taken possession of, and when the doctor came in an hour later Grandma Stapleton was singing "A Song of Sixpence" for Stuart the youngest urchin, who had by that time almost exhausted her stock of baby-ballads.

James Forsyth was, like his wife, a hearty, fresh-coloured sample of northern humanity, and though in his case a terrible disease had left the impress of its fingers all over his face, it had not broken up the good-humoured lines or robbed the lips of a single smile. His hair and the things he called whiskers were—well, suppose we say sandy, and his chin was as bare as if he had fixed the fashion of his features before the Crimean War brought beards into vogue.

He was rather stiff in his build and in his opinions; but a single glance into his clear hazel eyes told that he was shrewd, intelligent, and straightforward.

A hint was sufficient to send Mrs. Forsyth and the "bairns" from the room, and then Grandma Stapleton revealed her trouble, which was: firstly, that a will, known by them to exist, could not be found; and, secondly, that her daughter-in-law seemed under the influence of Mr. Mason, and had been "absolutely so indiscreet as to consent to put her dead husband's papers into that man's hands for the adjustment of her affairs."

James Forsyth shook his head. "That's a false move, Grandma Stapleton." He called her "grandma" like the rest. "Not but what Robert Mason's fairly honest, as the times go; and a ship-broker's the vara man to understand and settle the affairs of a seafaring man, and being ship-broker to the *Ariel*, he may be said to have the captain's affairs in his hands a'ready; but forbye, he's turned underwriter himsel, an' has a large stake in the lost ship, he's the vara *last* man to manage the widow's

business. I wad not," and he took a pinch of snuff by way of enphasis, "trust Robert Mason wi' a bawbee whar his ain interest was concairned."

"Then are you certain that Mr. Mason is one of the underwriters, and had an insurance on the *Ariel?*" questioned the lady, eagerly.

"As certain as the captain himsel told me the morning he asked me to be his executor, and garred me to tak care o' ye all if he went to the bottom, little thinking how true a word may be said in jest. But has na' Mr. Mason telt ye how much the underwriters will have to hand over to the widow when a' deductions have been made?"

"Not a syllable."

"Then I tell ye what, grandma, if you'll wait a wee, whilst I go into the surgery, and leave a prescreption or two wi' my assistant, I'll just go back wi' you to Larch Cottage and gie the puir, simple weedow-body a hint to 'mak nae mair haste than guid speed,' and no to put out her hand either to Robert Mason or any ither man farther than she can draw it back. She must engage a respectable accoountant or lawyer, who will look after everything, Mr. Mason and all."

Mr. Forsyth found a patient or two waiting in the surgery; he had to see medicine compounded, and write down prescriptions. Grandma Stapleton had been waiting in bonnet and shawl three parts of an hour when he was ready.

They had not far to walk. Brian and Willie Forsyth, long released from school, were racing up and down the avenue like unbroken colts. There was a pat on the head and a kind look alike to son and godson as the surgeon passed onwards.

"Mr. Mason's there, grandma," said Brian, with a jerk of his head backwards towards the cottage.

Yes, Mr. Mason was there. It was scarcely dusk, but the curtains had been drawn and the lamp lighted. Captain Stapleton's japanned deed-box had been forced open. Mr. Mason was busy among the papers, and he had just laid upon the table a folded document purporting to be the "Last will and testament of Brian Stapleton, mariner."

CHAPTER VI.

MERCY QUESTIONS DINAH.

"THERE's the missing will, madam," the new comers heard Mr. Mason say as they opened the door; and naturally pressed forward with some eagerness.

The pause for ordinary salutation was of the briefest, and a bystander might have seen that there was little cordiality in the greeting of the two men.

James Forsyth took up the document. A glance sufficed. "That no' the missing will," said he; "an' what's mair, it's no will at a', for it's neither dated nor signed. It's just waste paper."

On examination Mr. Mason saw that it was so, yet with that stereotyped smile of his, which seemed rather to purse up and draw his lips together than to open and expand them, he remarked: "Unfortunately, you are right, sir. But in the absence of any other evidence of our deceased friend's wishes, might it not be as well to read over the unexecuted document for the sake of information?"

"Aweel, that's a reasonable proposeetion," assented the doctor, and taking up the paper, he drew his chair close to the table, and proceeded to read it aloud by the light of the lamp.

As he read his countenance changed. The unsigned will had evidently been drawn up years before, for it set forth that the testator's mother was already sufficiently provided for, and that he gave everything of which he died possessed to his dear wife Frances for her sole use and benefit, and appointed his friend Robert Mason his executor. No mention of the children was made whatsoever.

"Dear, good, kind, trusting Brian," said the young widow, falling back in her chair with a half sob.

"Too trusting by half," murmured her mother-in-law as she watched the smile of Mr. Mason intensify.

James Forsyth's brow clouded as he laid down the paper and took out his silver snuff-box, once the property of Dr. Stapleton. Tapping the lid cogitatively, he said, *sotto voce*, "Aweel, it's no'

signed. There's muckle consolation in that," adding in a louder key, "Just waste paper, Mr. Mason; an' quite as weel I'm thinking, seein' that the will must hae been drawn up afore the bairns were born. An' it does not indicate Captain Stapleton's wishes either, as I know, for *I* was named executor of his *last* will; and in that he provided, not only for Brian and Hesba, but for the little sea-sprite Mercy."

"So Brian informed me as he gave the will into my keeping," said the old lady, "and I think we ought to be ruled by *that*."

"Yet here is a formal expression of your son's intentions, madam," suggested the white-faced shipbroker, putting his long forefingers down on the unsigned will.

"Unquestionably," murmured Fanny.

"Drawn up, na doubt, in the honeymoon," replied the doctor. "But it's nae use fashing ourselves ower a bit o' waste paiper; and sin' the true will canna' be found, we shall just hae to fa' back on the common law of the land in such cases."

Mr. Mason smiled grimly. Grandma Stapleton rang for the long-delayed tea, whilst Mr. Forsyth proceeded, "I'm no' sure aboot *English* law, but I've some notion that when a man dies intestate, and leaves a son, the son inherits, an' the wife can only claim her thirds. I'm no' clear how the case may be if the lad's a minor, and daren't venture an opinion lest I should lead you astray; an' so, Mrs. Brian, I'd advise you just to consult a sound lawyer, and let him manage your affairs for you."

Mr. Mason's lips had been pressed as tightly together as had his finger-tips; but now his features relaxed. With his most winning smile he handed a cup and saucer to Mrs. Brian, complimented Grandma Stapleton on the excellence of her tea, and in sundry little ways endeavoured to turn the conversation.

James Forsyth, however, was not to be put aside so easily. He did change the subject, but it was only to the very unexpected and uncongenial topic of the shipbroker's own liability to the estate; and, as he spoke with the decision of a man who had definite knowledge, Mr. Mason began to shift uneasily in his chair, as if a crop of thorns had suddenly sprung into existence beneath him.

At this juncture, when James Forsyth was pressing to know the precise number of thousands to be paid by the underwriters when all other claims were satisfied, and Mr. Mason pursed up his mouth to "h'm" and "ha" and "consider," a sharp

rat-tat at the door and a hurried summons for Dr. Forsyth to an urgent case left the polite, speckless, white-faced gentleman in smiling possession of the field. And so well did he use his opportunity, when grandma's long absence in the nursery (to which Dinah had not returned) left him alone with the fair widow, that when, at ten o'clock, he took his departure, he took also Fanny's instructions to select a solicitor, and her assent to his executorship in accordance with the only expression of her beloved husband's wish and intention that had come to light.

Yet no sooner was she free from the baleful influence of his keen black eyes, than she became apprehensive she had acted precipitately and unwisely, and, timid by nature, shrank from disclosing to her more clear-sighted and less malleable mother-in-law how far she had suffered the subtle leading and strong will of the purposeful man to overpower her own judgment.

It was not until the following day brought Mr. Robert Mason, the studs on whose shirt-front looked for all the world as Hesba said "like a second pair of black eyes on a second white face," and with him a dapper, restless little gentleman, also in black, whom he introduced as his friend, Mr. Septimus Crowe, of the eminent legal firm, Crowe and Liver, that the good lady was enlightened.

It was her usual hour for visiting her sick and poor pensioners when they arrived, as was well known to Mr. Mason, and when she got back, there was the plastic Fanny signing papers and giving authority to do this and that with a sort of sense of importance and the impression that she was furthering the best interests of her children, into which she had been cajoled.

Perhaps cajoled is too strong a term to employ. It was the one, however, which fell from the lips of grandma, when she saw how things stood.

"Oh, Fanny, how can you be such a simpleton as to let that man cajole you as he is doing. *His* lawyer! Why, you may be fleeced right and left!"

Whereupon Fanny waxed indignant at the aspersions cast on her own judgment and on the integrity of her poor husband's "best friend," winding up with a passionate flood of tears and lamentations that she should be misjudged, when she was trying to do the best for her dear children.

Grandma, who was anything but contentious, shrugged her shoulders, went into the nursery, heard Brian and Hesba their

lessons, and did not return to the parlour until she thought the rain would be over; but James Forsyth, coming in to say he had been making inquiries to find a trustworthy solicitor, opened up the subject again, and there was another drenching shower.

It was the first breach between Mrs. Stapleton the elder and Mrs. Stapleton the younger—a breach not likely to be closed so long as Mr. Mason came and went with sympathetic smiles and composed "regrets that mothers-in-law should so persistently attempt to rule their daughters-in-law, as if incompetent to act for themselves;" not likely to be closed when Fanny Stapleton, —whose strength had been scarcely equal to a stroll round their own garden with the shoulder of Hesba as a support—could accept a seat in an open carriage with Mr. Mason, for the benefit of the air, even though little Mercy *had* a place at their feet.

This was on a Saturday afternoon, when the ship-broker's office in Castle Street was closed. The air was fresh and balmy, the sun not oppressive, the change, the motion, the soft salutation of the sea-breeze as they drove westwards towards New Brighton, turning homewards at the Rock Battery, all tended to refresh and exhilarate. Her companion, too, was pleasantly conversational but not fatiguing, he knew better than to weary her at the outset. Fanny came back with a smile on her face, and Mercy was ecstatic. She had "seen the sea, and the ships, and the fort, and the 'itehouse."

Other excursions followed, mostly on a Saturday, not always in the same direction, and not always with Mercy as a make-weight.

Grandma was ready to admit that these drives into the country brought back the colour to the widow's cheeks, but in her heart of hearts she suspected treason against her dead son; and suspected it none the less when the shipbroker brought gifts of books and toys to the young people, as if to propitiate them.

Between her weak nerves, school, Mr. Mason's visits, and these drives, Mrs. Brian had latterly seen very little of her children, dearly as she loved them; but, there having been frequent collisions between Master Brian and Dinah Smart since that memorable holiday when he wounded her vanity—collisions which were sure to involve both Hesba and Mercy—grandma insisted on lessons being learned downstairs in an evening, since she could not prevail on Fanny to part with her maid.

If grandma also thought by their presence to get rid of Mr. Mason she was mistaken. He only appeared the better pleased, and to take quite a friendly—not to say fatherly—interest in the studies of the young people, expressing his surprise at their advancement, on which grandma was sure to take up the theme. "Ah, education was not what it is now when I was young. Girls have books and advantages undreamed of then. Science for girls would have been scouted, had anyone proposed it. Cookery would have been suggested instead, and with no idea of any connection between them. I don't think I ever heard the word 'physiology' beyond a dictionary when I was a girl," and she took up a school-book of Hesba's as she spoke.

This gave him an opportunity to prognosticate that "Miss Hesba would be quite a learned lady if she went into scientific subjects so early;" at which the mother smiled her gratification, but Hesba, thrusting the fingers of both hands in her hair, the better to ponder the lesson before her, barely looked up as she remarked, carelessly, "All the girls in my class learn the same." A proof that the bit of flattery had fallen pointless. Yet Hesba's teachers could have told that not *all* the class pursued the study with like avidity. It seemed to have a sort of fascination for her, and she was not content to learn all the books taught, like a parrot, but she traced the illustrative diagrams, pondered over perplexities, and not unfrequently puzzled her teachers with questions not elucidated in type.

Fanny Stapleton's prolonged helplessness inclined her to rest on any stronger arm held out as a support, and made her loth to dismiss the little maid who tossed muslin into caps so deftly, was such an adept in the arts of the toilette, and took all the care of her wardrobe off her hands, although complaints of her prying curiosity and elfish tricks were becoming frequent.

On a hint from Mr. Mason, she had herself rebuked her for curiously peeping out on the stairs if a visitor came, and for opening drawers and boxes without authority; but Dinah had always a ready excuse, and her lapses in this respect were represented as the result of some work of supererogation, for which she expected praise, not blame.

Autumn shed its russet leaves, and winter sifted down its fleecy snows, before Mrs. Brian came round to her mother-in-law's opinion of Dinah, and then she was stirred by two incidents,

which chanced to come pretty closely together, and under her own observation.

The sixth of March came in, bold and blustering, to salute the twins with his rough kisses, and remind them that they were eleven years old.

Little Mercy, with her hands full of newly-gathered daffodils, was first of the household to wish them "Many happy returns of the day," and present her simple offering, before they had well washed the sleep from their eyes; hugging and kissing them as if a birthday was the most delightful and extraordinary thing in the world.

As Brian and Hesba hurried down stairs to receive other but not fonder greetings and congratulations from their elders, she lingered behind, wondering, not for the first time, how it was she never had a birthday, and in her wonder put the question to Dinah, then arranging the nursery.

Dinah gave her a momentary stare with open eyes.

"Why have *you* no birthdays, Miss Mercy? Laws! I suppose folks as belong to nobody has no birthdays; I belong to nobody, and I have no birthdays," answered Dinah, as she turned the clothes off Hesba's bed to air.

"And have you no birthdays either?" interrogated little miss, like an echo, adding, after a moment's deliberation, "But 'belong to nobody!' What do you mean? I belong to mamma and grandma."

"No, you doesn't," and Dinah grinned. "There's not so much odds between you and me, little miss, as you may think. I was picked up in a basket under a market stall, and you was picked up in a bundle at sea. And the bundle's in that cupboard now, and I'll show it you some day, if you'll say nothing to nobody. But, laws, Miss Mercy, nobody knows your father and mother no more than they knows mine, only you had the good luck to be picked up by kind-hearted folk, who could afford to keep you; and I was picked up by a bobby and sent to the union."

Little Mercy sat silent and aghast on her low chair. Could this be true? The reference to the bundle in the cupboard sounded like the truth. Yet, her dear mamma downstairs *not* her mamma! Her drowned papa *not* her papa! It was a mystery her six years' brain could not fathom. She started from her seat and darted towards the door. "I'll go and ask

mamma, I will; you're only telling tales to frighten me"—Dinah's capacity in that direction being well known.

She was quick, but Dinah was quicker. With an elfish look of cunning on her face she intercepted the child's path and caught her by the arm.

"No, you don't; if I catch you saying one word to anyone of what I've told you, I'll just tell the bobby as picked me up, and he'll carry you off to the union too, and you'll never see none of your friends no more. And I'll not show you the bundle, and I'll never tell you another word about it."

Just as Dinah's voice and manner had frightened a promise of silence out of the little one, up burst Brian and Hesba in high glee to show their birthday presents, and to tell Mercy there was an invitation for them all to spend the day at Dr. Forsyth's, and that she must hurry downstairs, for there was a wax doll for her, "such a beauty!" With childhood's quick transition from grave to gay, Mercy clapped her hands, cried, "Then I'm to have a birthday too!" and was off, an admonitory glance from Dinah chilling her enthusiasm and loading her little heart with the great burden of mystery and secrecy.

The wonderful doll, which had chestnut curls just like her own, and would close its blue eyes on the mere touch of a spring, was a wonderful consoler. Then there was the dressing and preparation for a gala-day at the Forsyth's, and the wrapping up in woollens and waterproofs, and the buffeting with wind and shower by the way, and their hearty reception by the doctor and his wife, Willie, his brothers and sisters; then there were cakes and fruits, and all other nice things, a store of playthings and a big nursery, where they played games to their hearts' content, and were never told 'the din was unbearable'; and in the day's delights Mercy lost sight of the morning's trouble.

Their excitement had not subsided when, about nine o'clock at night, they reached home, and were greeted on the very threshold by Dinah Smart with the announcement that there was "a famous birth-day present in the parlour for Master Brian."

In he was rushing pell-mell when the same voice in sharpened tones called him back to "take off those muddy boots and put slippers on before he went and trod on the carpet," an admonition which extended to all three.

With a hasty "Oh, bother!" Master Brian obeyed, leaving his boots in the hall by the side of the hat-stand, where Hesba and

Mercy also left theirs, the while Dinah did a little in the way of flirtation with the big doctor's-boy who had been their escort home.

Yes, there was a birthday gift to gladden any boy's heart! A yacht more than half-a-yard long, taut and trim, with all its white sails set, stood upon the centre table, and there sat Mr. Mason smiling beyond it, as if well satisfied with the acceptability of his present.

Brian's eyes glittered; but somehow he stammered and stuttered over his thanks as he had not so hesitated all the day before. Beside the yacht lay a handsomely-bound book for Hesba, and a small box of colours for Mercy, over which she went into ecstasies of delight, crying out, "Oh, it must be my birthday, too! Isn't it my birthday, grandma?"

"It may be, darling, for anything——" Then grandma seeing the strange look that crossed the lovely little face, checked herself, and added, "Yes, it must be your birthday too," and a kiss was laid on the inquiring lips which had as much of pity as of love in it.

Full of excitement over the day's doings, the children were hustled off to bed by Dinah, to sleep heavily in the morning and rise late.

Young Mrs. Stapleton had always a cup of tea in bed before she dressed.

To her surprise, Eliza carried up her tray in the morning, and was the bearer of a petition from Dinah for leave to spend the day out, Eliza expressing her willingness to be her substitute at home.

Fanny was shrewd enough in some things. She raised herself on her elbow.

"Why did not Dinah come herself? Have I been so bad a mistress that she is afraid to ask a favour, and must get you to shoot her bullets? Send her to me."

"Why did you not ask to go out last night?" was the first query put to her.

"Because I did not know till this morning, m'm."

"How so?"

"I had a letter, m'm."

"I thought you could not read writing."

"The postman read it for me, m'm."

"Oh! and who requires to see you so early?"

"My sister, m'm. She wants me to go with her to buy a dress."

"Indeed! Then your sister must wait until I have consulted Mrs. Stapleton. But I thought you had no sister?"

Without the wink of an eyelash, Dinah answered, readily, "Pleas'm, she has been away in Australy;" and Dinah was then told to retire.

Just at that moment, there seemed an unaccountable running up and down stairs, and Brian's voice, in very positive tones, asserting something.

Presently in came Hesba. "Mamma, Brian says he has lost some money, and he will not tell us how much. But he says it is one coin, and he insists that he left it downstairs last night."

"Dear me, the boy is always losing his money. I wish Dinah would sew the holes up in his pockets."

In came grandma. "Fanny, will you slip on a dressing-gown, and come downstairs? Here is Brian persisting that he has lost a large coin, that he left it downstairs, and that some one must have taken it, and he will neither say where he got the money, nor how much it was. He says it was more than half-a-crown; and there is quite a commotion among the servants about it."

They found all in an uproar downstairs; the cook and Eliza in hot indignation, and Dinah with her old look of stolid, dogged impenetrability, as persistent as the others that she had seen no money lying about, and should not have taken it if she had; and she more than insinuated that Master Brian had had no money to lose.

At last Brian, pressed by mother and grandmother, very reluctantly—for he expected to be rebuked for carelessness—admitted, with some heat, "Well, if you must know, it was a *sovereign*. Godfather gave it me as a birthday present, and I put it in my right *boot*, lest in playing I should lose it out of my pockets. And I *left it in my boot* when I took it off in the lobby before I came into the parlour!"

During this speech Dinah's black eyes seemed to grow green. At its close, her hand, which had been clenched, flung the sovereign, almost across the room, at Brian's feet.

"There! since you have told what it was, and where you left it. But if I had once got out of this house, you would never have seen a shilling of it again! I thought it was dropped in the boot by Mr. Mason or Mrs. Stapleton to try if I was honest, and I meant to be upsides with them as was so

wicked as to put temptation into a poor girl's way. And it *was* wicked and a shame, and I believe it *was* put there a-purpose to try me."

"And you thought if you changed it, we should have no proof against you?"

"Yes."

"And you never thought that the eye of God was upon you?"

"I thought that them who was so wicked as to tempt me deserved to lose their money; and I do think so."

"Then I suppose the tale you told me about your letter was pure invention?" said Mrs. Brian.

But nothing more was to be got from Dinah. She, however, with Mrs. Brian's consent, received a "month's notice" before the day was over.

CHAPTER VII.

A FALL.

"SHARP young woman, that! Has a peculiar code of morals. Certain she knows something of the lost will. Must not lose sight of her," murmured Mr. Robert Mason, as he left Larch Cottage that evening, after hearing the episode of the stray sovereign.

"Aweel," quoth James Forsyth, when he heard; "I misdoubted the lassie from the vara first. I thought there was something uncanny about her; but then I said to mysel', 'James Forsyth, that's no chareetable, let us wait a wee.' An' e'en now I wad na be too hard on the lassie. It was a sair temptation to a poor body wha has had neither kith nor kin to teach her the deeference between the narrow road an' the braw wide one. But I'd just keep the bairns beyond evil communications as lang she stays wi' ye."

"You may rest assured I shall," was grandma's reply, and she did her best to keep the young people away from the contamination of untruthfulness and dishonesty.

Dinah, who felt, or professed to feel, herself the injured party, resented it with sullenness and mutterings, scowling at Brian with her deep-set eyes whenever she heard his name or he came within her sight. Her own feelings at the time must not have been pleasant or comfortable, for even in the kitchen the other servants held aloof from her; she had never been a favourite, and now she seemed the very Pariah of the household.

Nay, there was one exception: little Mercy followed the disgraced maid with her large brown wistful eyes, and when unobserved slipped up into the nursery to keep her company in her loneliness; as she afterwards said excusingly to her own friends, "Dinah belonged to nobody, and there had been nobody ever to love her, or to make her be good," and the child, who had been told she herself belonged to nobody, had turned over the idea in her own young mind, and began to feel what a very terrible thing it must have been.

In return for her childish sympathy—at first rejected with

a flounce—Dinah revealed, with many embellishments of her own to the intensely eager listener crouching at her feet, how, in a great storm, when it was pitch dark, when the sea was rolling, and nothing could be heard but the roar of the wind and the thunder, she was blown on the deck of Captain Stapleton's ship, bundled in a shawl, right into Master Brian's face; adding that nobody owned her, and that she might "thank her stars *she* had not been sent to the workhouse, but fallen among people who could afford to keep a babby as didn't belong to them, and hadn't no name."

"No name?" gasped Mercy.

"Bless you, how was they to know your name? Captain called you Mercy, because it was a mercy you wasn't drownded, and gave you his name when he 'dopted you; just as they called me Dinah Smart at the workhouse because I happened to look smart. I know they made me smart many a time." And then Dinah proceeded to give such a leaf out of the workhouse nursery note-book, contrasted with Miss Mercy's "better luck," as made the child shudder at possibilities, and thankful in her secret heart for her own better fortune,—"if it was all true."

A great "if," that. She knew Dinah did not always speak the truth. She would like to see the bundle, to be convinced.

Answering her importunity, Dinah mounted on a high chair to the nursery cupboard, and came down with a scared face to whisper, "It's not there; it's been took away!" Then clasping her hands, as if struck by some sudden and painful recollection, she cried, "Oh! and I can't put them back! I can't put them back!—and they'll say—and they'll think——"

Mercy's look of wonderment no less than her inquiry, "Put what back?" recalled Dinah's self-possession. She palmed off on the child a ready fable, and bound her over to silence, with a promise to find out where the bundle had been placed before she went away; a well-intentioned promise—not to be kept.

The following afternoon—a half-holiday with the children—old Mrs. Stapleton had gone across the river to Liverpool on a shopping expedition, taking Mercy with her for a treat, and Eliza to carry her parcels. In the parlour, Hesba, with Mr. Mason's birthday-book in her hands, sat reading aloud to her mamma, whose fingers were occupied with some light muslin work, as she swayed gently to and fro in her rocking-chair by the fireside.

Only the cheep-cheep of a sparrow outside, and Hesba's musical voice, broke the stillness, when the door softly opened, and Brian, supposed to be playing with Willie Forsyth in the avenue, put in a face white as the widow's cap, save for a red gash over the left eyebrow, and said in faint, apologetic tones, "I've fallen from the tree;" the tree meaning a large old elm at one end of the enclosure, which he had a passion for climbing,

Both started to their feet, a simultaneous cry of surprise, pain, and anguish on their lips. Mrs. Brian's hand went involuntarily to the bell; but, ere the summons for assistance rang through the house, Hesba had sprung across the room, and was leading her brother's failing steps to the sofa she had quitted. After the one wild outburst, "Oh, Brian!" her white lips pressed emotion tightly in. She felt the need of self-control, for surely as she saw the falling drops from the cut brow leave red splashes on the carpet, she saw her frightened mother sink back helpless in her chair, only able to wring her hands and cry, "My boy! my boy! he is killed! He will bleed to death! Oh! why is grandma not here?"

Hesba, not one whit less anguish-stricken, saw with dismay what a useless rag was her handkerchief to staunch the wound, yet answered cheerily, "No, no, mamma; don't alarm yourself. I know how grandma would plaister it up. He will be all right soon; won't you, Brian?"

Turning as she spoke for a better bandage, she discovered that Dinah was in the room, a silent looker-on, with no more apparent interest in the scene than if she had been a waiting-machine.

"Oh, Dinah!" the girl cried, "my brother has met with a terrible accident. I want some diachylon plaister to stop the bleeding. Mamma, please give Dinah money, and ask her to run to the chemist's for some. You know grandma's room is locked up. And oh, Dinah! do run: you see we want it in a hurry."

But Dinah was in no hurry, though the agitated wishes of her mistress supplemented the appeal of Hesba's voice and eyes.

"Oh, don't stop for your bonnet!" cried the latter in despair, as the elfish creature went deliberately upstairs to equip herself, regardless of their urgency; and, coming back, composedly stopped at the open parlour door, and, unmoved by their solicitude, pulled out and adjusted the bows of her bonnet-strings with almost defiant slowness. Their piteous calls for her to hurry might have fallen on deaf ears. But at Hesba's last impatient

cry, "Oh, do make haste, or he will bleed to death!" a look which said plainly as words, "Then let him!" shot like a greenish spark from her coal-black eyes, as she glanced across the room at the pallid face and the crimsoned kerchief that was so inefficient.

And so she went her errand, with a coolness irritating and agitating to those whose impatient anxiety counted the very timepiece slow.

They had not yet learned the whole of the disaster. As his sister bent over him, Brian whispered, hardly above a breath, "Hesba, I am afraid my arm is broken," and then for the first time she observed that his left arm hung powerless.

For the life of her she could not suppress the low-voiced exclamation, "Broken! Oh, Brian!"

It was no use for him to say "Hush!" A mother's ears are ever on the alert. There was a scream from the chair behind Hesba. Weak, timid, helpless, affectionate Mrs. Brian Stapleton had fainted. There was no sign of Dinah, and Brian appeared on the point of fainting also.

It was a situation to try the nerves of a girl older than Hesba.

In an instant she had set the bell in motion, and a succession of hurried peals brought cook from the kitchen, wondering "what that girl Dinah was about that she could not answer."

Cook was of another sort than Dinah, an older woman, too. She had no prior knowledge of the accident, but a glance was sufficient.

From a horse-shoe geranium in the window she plucked a green leaf which had survived the winter, and bade Hesba bind that on her brother's brow to stop the bleeding, whilst she "took care of missis."

Before dilatory Dinah appeared at the gate, smirking and smiling in the wake of Dr. Forsyth, Hesba had not only found sal-volatile to revive her mamma and her brother, when the doctor entered, but from some forgotten store in the nursery brought a few inches of plaister, which she had cut into strips, and was strapping across the ugly cut, with the confidence of long practice on her dolls.

"Vara neatly done, my lass. When I'm in want of an asseestant I'll only just have to send for Miss Hesba. Ye'll mak' a first-rate nurse, lassie."

Hesba's heart was then almost too sore to feel the compliment. She pointed in silence to the helpless arm, and the doctor nodded gravely in reply. Removing Hesba's plaister to examine and close the lips of the cut, explaining that he did so to ascertain if the wound was clean, he re-strapped it, and then called cook to help him upstairs with the lad, and leave Hesba with her mother.

But no; Brian was too proud to be carried, and Hesba refused to quit her brother! Yet Brian found he was unable to stand, and he could not repress a groan when his arm was moved; obedience was a necessity.

We need not follow the boy to his bed, or the doctor in the setting and bandaging the limb; but we must add that Hesba acted then as the latter's assistant, and watched his movements with a quiet observation, keeping well concealed the keenness of her pain when her brother chanced to wince under the surgeon's hand.

Grandma had come home in the meantime, with Mercy, eager to show a new hat with lavender trimmings bought in Liverpool; and in the course of hurried cross-questions and inquiries it came out that Brian had climbed the tree to watch Willie down the avenue and out at the gate, and in waving his hat as a farewell had slipped and fallen. That Dinah had *not* earned young Mrs. Stapleton's eager thanks for fetching the doctor. Quite the reverse. He had chanced to call at the chemist's just after she left the shop, whilst chemist and shopman were animadverting on the excessive coolness the young woman displayed over her young master's accident. That stepping across the road to ascertain for himself the nature of Brian's injury, he had found her laughing and gossiping with one of the cabmen, the plaister in her hand, with an air of utter indifference.

Then Mrs. Brian and Hesba followed suit with their experience of her wilful dilatoriness, and the evil look in her eyes, to which James Forsyth said,

"There's something uncanny about the lass, there's nae doubt. It may be the faut o' her bringing up. But, whatever it be, after *this* I'd no keep her under *my* roof forty-eight hours. If it hadna been for Hesba's uncommon aptitude and presence of mind the lad might hae been in a sorry plight. It was just an ugly cut—I'll no deny, a dangerous one."

It was quite sufficient for Fanny Stapleton to learn that Dinah's wilful delay had endangered her darling boy's life; and

that it *was* wilful the girl's own look as she put her bonnet-strings in order was abundant proof. The mother shuddered as she thought of it.

The excitement had not subsided when Mr. Mason walked in. He was wonderfully sympathetic with the distressed widow; deplored the rashness and temerity of boys; excused Brian on the ground that he lacked a father's restraining hand; had a word of approval for Hesba, and strongly reprobated the conduct of Dinah.

He was present, too, when she was ordered to pack her boxes ready to quit in the morning with a month's wages in lieu of notice, and took note of the pert reply.

"I can go at once if you wish. I suppose I'm old enough and *ugly* enough to take care of myself," she had jerked out with a scornful toss of her big head.

"Then you *shall* go at once," said grandma, "since kindness is thrown away upon you."

"Haven't seen the kindness yet, m'm. I've had my wages, and done my work for it, and been told I was 'an ugly elf' into the bargain. It's to be hoped, m'm, Master Brian's beauty won't be spoiled; but scars *is* damaging;" and with an extra curl of her nose, she turned on her heel, the smiling gentleman by the fireside watching her from beneath his bushy brows. And he had strolled away as far the avenue gate, where he stood smoking a cigar, when Dinah came down for a cab to go off in.

Dinah had given herself too many airs, had been too capricious to be regretted, even in the kitchen, and she went away in disgrace, but self-important to the last; and she carried away with her, concealed in the folds of her dress, that which should make her going memorable to those she left.

Old Mrs. Stapleton had long been of opinion that a girl so illiterate, prying, and untruthful was pernicious as an associate and exemplar for children. She breathed more freely when the diminutive creature was gone, and if Fanny Stapleton had a sigh for her deft handmaid, she checked it on the instant with the memory of Dinah's glance and Dinah's trifling with her bonnet-strings, when her darling boy's life seemed to hang on her celerity.

If anyone in the house had a kind thought or a word of regret for the girl it was little Mercy. Wearied with her Liverpool expedition, affected beyond measure by Brian's disaster, she had

cried herself to sleep, and did not wake until the morning. It was no new thing for Hesba to dress her, but when she comprehended that Dinah was gone she burst into tears because she had never said "good-bye." It was explained that Dinah had "been naughty" and sent away in disgrace.

She caught at the word, and, in a sort of childish dismay, asked, with catching breath, "Shall *I* be sent away if I am naughty?"

The laughter and kisses which greeted this query were somewhat reassuring; but when she gravely added, "Because I thought I might, as I belong to nobody," grandma decided it was quite time to ascertain "who put that notion into the child's head." And then it transpired that Dinah had been over communicative both with respect to Mercy's antecedents and her own, which caused some severe strictures on the deposed nurse. Whereupon Mercy, with tears in her beautiful eyes, made her appeal for the dark-skinned foundling of the basket and the workhouse, "You know *she* belonged to nobody, and had nobody to love her and make her good."

Grandma told James Forsyth when he came to see his patient, "My breakfast seemed to choke me after that. I felt as if somehow we had not altogether done our duty by Dinah. But you see, Mr. Forsyth, servant-girls nowadays are not what they were when I was a young girl. Then they were almost part of the family, and had its interest at heart."

"Perhaps, ma'am, the mistresses are not what they were then. No doubt your mither took an interest in her maids, knew a' aboot them, an' was sorry when the mither of one was sick, or the sweetheart of another enlisted; and did na mind writing a letter home now and again for a lass who had na gone to schuil!"

"Well, yes, doctor, you are about right. There is something to be said on both sides; but altogether things are very different to what they were when I was a girl."

"Na doobt," said the doctor, drily; "an' you yersel' are vara deeferent too."

To which the old lady assented with something between a laugh and a sigh, and went back to Brian's bedside.

In addition to his prominent injuries and exhaustion from loss of blood, the boy was much bruised and shaken by his fall. Some weeks elapsed before he was able to quit his bed. He

had, however, no lack of kind nurses, although there was one hand short in the house. The additional labour was divided, and no one uttered a complaint. Hesba had at once appropriated Mercy as her charge, and set her the lesson of self-help by word and example as no elder could have done. But there was no spare time before or after school-hours she did not devote to her brother, begging grandma "to lie down and rest," and at no time did Brian feel so tenderly, so sympathetically handled or tended, as when Hesba was his nurse.

Little Mercy was allowed to creep in on tiptoe on a promise to be quiet; but she never disturbed him, and soon he seemed to miss the little figure if she was long away. After a while Willie Forsyth brought books to read at the bedside of his friend, but Hesba was her twin-brother's all-in-all during this period of pain. His mother made an effort to watch and tend him at the first; but so acute were her own sufferings when any involuntary shadow of pain fell across his brow, that her attendance had to be forbidden. His small room, however, lay between the nursery and hers; there was a door of communication, and often in the night-time she would rise, glide in noiselessly, and look upon him as he slept, or administer to his wants if awake. But only the boy and herself knew this.

Another person found his way to Brian's bedside, one Brian did not much care to see. Still less did he care to have the long, white, slender fingers of this visitor feeling his pulse so frequently and long, as if he were a doctor. It reminded him somehow of the same fingers gripping his younger wrist and leaving blue marks behind.

Whether the same thought floated through his mind that he would not like Mr. Mason for his papa, I know not, but certainly Mr. Mason won his way into the mother's heart by these attentions to her son, and the servants in the kitchen began to speculate how much longer their young mistress would wear her widow's weeds.

CHAPTER VIII.

WOOED AND MARRIED AN' A.

MRS. BRIAN STAPLETON did not doff her widow's weeds so speedily as the maids had anticipated. She had loved her husband, clung to his memory, and mourning to her was no merely conventional symbol. The shopping of grandma on the day of Brian's disastrous fall, of which second-mourning lavender-trimmed hats formed a part, had reference more to the young people than to their mother. The boy had long been up and about, cast off splints and bandages, and was ready for a race or a game of cricket before she reduced a single fold of her heavy crape.

Not that the desirability of a change had not been pressed upon her; a change that should substitute a bridal dress for the "weeds;" and—but this was not said—thus obviate the necessity of transferring some twelve or thirteen thousand pounds from Mr. Robert Mason's account to hers.

No; she heard only of the long and secret devotion to her which had kept him a bachelor, which sought its reward now in the hope to support her weakness, to cherish her into health, to shield her loved and delicate form from rude contact with the world, to give the children she adored a protector and guardian, with a firmer hand than her own to control them as they progressed to maturity, a father, to watch over their interests and manage their little property as no paid agent could.

This was the sort of thing she heard, not in so many clear and consecutive words, but in language sufficiently plain to be interpreted as a desire to be a father to the children of his friend for her sake, and to be all the world to her in his own unselfish devotion.

If she hesitated and deliberated it was not that she had mistrusted him. It was that she was afraid—afraid of Grandma Stapleton's objections—afraid lest Brian and Hesba should disapprove of him for a stepfather.

Yet she never took this inner consciousness as a warning voice.

She shrank from calling the sensible and kindly old lady to her counsels, though before Mr. Mason's intervention, no mother and daughter could have been more social and open in their intercourse. She tossed an unquiet head upon her pillow, vacillating between her desire to do her duty to her children, and her uncertainty in which direction her duty lay.

One thing is certain, she was swayed more by her love for them than by any other motive. There were tendrils of her heart which clung to her good mother-in-law; but Robert Mason had done his best to loosen these, and when she thought of the frail tenure on which she held her own life, she remembered that years would be creeping on Grandma Stapleton, and what a dreadful thing it would be if her darling boy and girl were left alone in the world without a protector; and even little Mercy, what would become of her?

Meanwhile Mr. Septimus Crowe had busied himself about her affairs, had disentangled complications, announced that ship and life insurances were ready to be paid over on the widow's administration; but still there was delay, and this was explained to arise from the want of some important papers relative to a plot or plots of land at Birkenhead, for which the Dock Commissioners appeared to have been in treaty, if a sale had not actually been effected before the captain sailed. So much they had gathered from the captain's private memoranda, but it was impossible to assess value for probate, or make any claim on tenants or on the Dock Commissioners without those papers.

Little restless Mr. Crowe came to the cottage, dipped his beak once more into the japanned box, examined its contents with his head on one side, first with one eye and then the other, like a veritable bird; then ferreted amongst a miscellaneous heap of luggage and litter (to the detriment of his black plumage) in the room—once the surgery—into which the captain had flung and stowed away numberless odds and ends. He lost his time and his temper (both of which grandma told Fanny she was sure to find in his bill), but he did not find what he went to seek, and grandma was dumb as a stone.

Both the solicitor's office and the shipbroker's were in Castle Street. The little Crowe hopped up the steps of the latter, who stood in the doorway.

"It's no use! There's not a trace of either," he croaked huskily; "choked with the dust," he explained.

"Then the old woman must have got the title-deeds in her clutches," said the other, his dark brows meeting as he spoke. "As for the railway shares, I tell you I had them in my own hands, and if not put back in the box by mistake, I *must* have dropped them, either there or on my way home. It's a *loss*, Crowe; we must advertise."

A very peculiar and covert advertisement found its way into the local papers that week, but nothing came of it except chagrin and cost.

Finally, it was arranged that the widow should "administer" without reference to this intangible "Birkenhead property," to which the very Dock Commissioners either could not or would not furnish a clue. And a settlement being effected shortly after probate, she was congratulated on having something over fourteen thousand pounds at her disposal, nothing being said in the lawyer's office with respect to any other heirship, beyond the fact that she was her son's natural guardian until he came of age.

At Larch Cottage, however, she had reminders from both grandma and James Forsyth that she was also the custodian of her son's rights, and that James meant to watch over the boy and those rights if he lived.

Of course, Hesba, being only a girl, had no legal status, and Mercy, being a foundling, had, if possible, less.

Of course, too, the well-meaning Fanny was distressed at her good intentions and her love for her children being doubted, and, as usual, washed away reasoning with tears.

Prior to this, however, she had consented to give her children another guardian, and they had barely got their thirteenth birthday over when Mr. Mason (who had long discarded his black studs) bore Fanny Stapleton off in triumph to a new villa residence he had taken and fitted up for her at Edge Hill, a suburb of Liverpool, as far removed from Woodside as his own convenience would permit.

Vain had been grandma's pleading to keep her grandchildren; in vain did she urge the value of pursuing their present course of education, the school friendships they had formed, her own prospective loneliness; the mother could not part with the children she idolised, for whose very sakes she was marrying again, and the twins would not hear of parting from Mercy.

Mr. Mason came forward with a smiling compromise. The children should remain at Woodside until the midsummer vacation, when he hoped they would carry any number of school prizes away with them.

He announced likewise, as an act of graciousness, casting his black eyes round the cosy parlour as he spoke, that he proposed to leave with Mrs. Stapleton "all the personal belongings of her late son, with which the cottage seemed to be crowded, and which must be very precious to her."

The old lady merely inclined her head in acknowledgment, not for one moment taken in. "Ah!" she thought to herself, "he's afraid they may be precious to Fanny too. He means to wean her from all old memories, and thinks they would be quite out of place in his brand-new villa." And so the Chinese junk and carvings, the stuffed birds and grotesque ornaments, the model ship and its painted portrait, *et hoc genus omne*, kept their places in Larch Cottage, along with the bundle belonging to little Mercy. It may be that Robert Mason was as desirous to forget his friend Captain Stapleton as he wished his wife to be, and wanted no reminders.

Very elegantly furnished was the handsome villa at Edge Hill, which stood in just sufficient garden-ground to preserve its exclusiveness, and very attentive was Robert Mason to his wife's comfort; and very stately were the grand dinner parties he gave in her honour; but the magnificence and state wearied her. She never had been fond of company or of strangers, and she longed for a quiet chat with grandma, a glimpse of her dear children.

Her new "lord and master"—he *was* her "lord and master"—promised repeatedly to "run over to Woodside some evening and bring them all to spend the following day" with her, but he was always "so anxious and afraid to leave her alone for a night lest she should be uneasy," or so "detained by pressing business" that it was procrastinated until the very time came when the young people were to leave the old home for the new; and then he was too solicitous about her health to "risk her presence when Mrs. Stapleton took leave of the youngsters. There was sure to be a scene!"

And finding her feeble remonstrance unavailing, she sank back with a submissive sigh on her couch of blue velvet pile, to still

her palpitating heart, and await, in listless inactivity, the coming of her darlings. She had soon found that she had no longer a will of her own. But in combating her wishes and desires, he made it so evident that he was actuated by the very best of motives, and the truest affection for herself, that she was compelled to yield to his stronger will, whatever misgivings were at her heart.

Truly there was "a scene" at parting. Though the Forsyths had professedly taken leave overnight, when Brian consigned his yacht to Willie, and there had been a general interchange of books and dolls as keepsakes beforehand, Willie was waiting at the lower gates for a last good-bye; and there was sobbing in the kitchen, both cook and Eliza having watched the growth of the children from infancy.

The parting from their beloved and indulgent grandma was the saddest wrench of all. They were like young emigrants bound to a new clime, and leaving a solitary parent behind; or, rather, like exiles being hurried off from home by an inexorable gaoler. Many had been the embraces during the previous day or two, Brian alone stoutly mastering his grief, and scorning the unmanliness of tears. Yet even he broke down at last, and with his sister and Mercy clung to grandma weeping, and she to them, even at the very gate, where the waiting cab was already piled with their luggage; and it was not until Mr. Mason observed pointedly, "It was time I came for them or they would forget they had a mother," that the good old lady choked back her tears with a strong effort, disengaged their clinging arms, gave a last kiss to each, as Mr. Mason hurried them one by one into the cab, to the sore disappointment of Willie Forsyth, who could only send his adieus after them with a shout and a wave of the hand, whilst Mrs. Stapleton retrod the avenue with hasty feet and bowed head to sit down alone on her desolate hearth, with desolation in her own soul.

Well was it then that the aged woman who sat there, with covered face, like "Rachel, weeping for her children," unconscious that the sunbeams of June were playing on her black dress, her white cap and grey hair, and glinted in the tears which found their way between her tremulous fingers—well was it then for her that she had walked through life with an Unseen Friend and Comforter by her side—a Friend closer than a brother, who stilled her tears and whispered "peace," until the sunshine of faith

and hope once more irradiated her countenance, and she saw in the vacant chairs presentiments of a young man and two fair maidens who, freed from coercion, would come once more to live with her and comfort her old age.

"If it only please God to restore the missing will (and I know it will come to light some day)," she murmured to herself, "I will have my darlings out of Robert Mason's hands. There is one good thing, he has not got Hesba's little fortune under his finger and thumb, and shall *not* have whilst I live, or James Forsyth lives either. As he says, it looks very suspicious that little Mercy's railway-shares were not put in for probate. I feel convinced they were in poor dear Brian's box, and am only afraid the two black crows have snapped them up between them. Heigho, I get very suspicious as I grow old, and I am sure this is not Christian charity. Who am I that I should so judge another? Mr. Mason may turn out better than we expect, and Fanny certainly stood in need of someone to think and act for her, and she had a right to please herself. The All-wise Ruler of events will shape the future to His will, however we may rebel."

As she so ruminated, she lifted the large Bible from its stand, wiped her tear-dimmed eyes, took her spectacles from their case, sat down to refresh her weary soul at its unfailing fountain, and when Eliza brought in her solitary tea equipage, there was a placid smile on her face, as if she had found rest and consolation.

To the children, Hesba and Brian especially, the meeting with mamma scarcely compensated for the parting with grandma. The very journey, whether by cab, or ferry-boat, or rail, had all interest taken out of it by the chilling presence of their stepfather. And as they were driven through a wide open carriage gate, the stateliness of the stuccoed villa and its well laid-out grounds, over which a great sycamore kept guard, somewhat overawed them. They saw it was a square-built house with large french-casements both to the windows on the ground floor on each side the entrance, and also on the floor above, across which ran a balcony of ornamental ironwork, and that there were dormer windows in the roof, but they had only time for a cursory glance as a "boy in buttons" opened the coach door, and crossing a wide hall, they were led upstairs.

They were ushered into a spacious drawing-room, resplendent

with glass and gilding, enriched with carved wood and velvety blue upholstery; they trod on a carpet that sank beneath their feet, but they only saw before them a figure in light-tinted silk and lace rising from amongst embroidered cushions, to meet them with extended arms. As they rushed forward they heard from behind a cold "Restrain your emotions, Frances; excitement is not good for you!"

It checked the mother midway, and had a like effect upon Hesba and Brian, as was intended.

Mercy, however, comprehending less, darted onward and flung her arms around "dear, dear mamma." But even *she* felt there was something different in the clasp of mamma's arms, in the warmth of her kisses, and something prompted her to wonder in her secret heart if it was because she "did not belong to her?"

The chill on their reception was not over; Mrs. Mason fain would have shown the children to their rooms, and have pointed out how their individual tastes and habits had been provided for, but Mr. Mason rang the bell for a servant, saying, apologetically, but conclusively, "You really must not exert yourself so much, Frances, it will do you harm," and Frances, with a sigh, sat down.

"Do you think mamma is ill again, Brian?" asked Hesba, pondering, as they followed the neatly-dressed maid over the rich carpets and up the wide staircase, all so unlike their old home. "She must be growing worse; he seems afraid of her stirring."

Brian shook his head. "Didn't want her to come with us, I've a notion," he whispered in her ear; a supposition that robbed their prettily-furnished rooms of half their brightness.

Mercy alone was open to receive impressions in all their newness and beauty. Everything was charming and enchanting, from the brass bedsteads, the wardrobes and other furniture, painted *en suite*, to the very toilet services, so different to the old-fashioned fittings of Larch Cottage. Light, airy, summerified they were, but Mercy was the only one who found summer in them; and even she objected that Brian's room was so far removed from theirs, a long corridor dividing them.

Nor was the evening much more satisfactory. There was a dinner when they expected tea, and they discovered that they had been required to dress for it. The rebuke was mild, and

there was a bland intimation from Mr. Mason that the omission would be overlooked on that occasion, as their clothes might not be unpacked, and they, perhaps, knew no better; but in future when they dined with himself and their mamma they must make themselves presentable.

Mild as was the rebuke, it conveyed to all three that they were "not presentable," that something was wanting in their social education, and that the free home-life of Larch Cottage was gone for evermore.

Nor did the hour or so spent in the drawing-room dissipate the impression, although their stepfather appeared bent on making himself agreeable. There was too much effort and too little heart in his addresses to win his way into *their* hearts; too much constraint put on their voices and "good-night" embraces to send them to bed light and happy.

Mr. Mason's absence at business might open the way for freer intercourse with the loving mother, but the memory of that icy reception did not pass away, and ere long they found that school-hours and study left few and brief moments for familiar and affectionate association as of old; whilst grandma they rarely saw. All Liverpool and the waters of the Mersey lay between Edge Hill and Woodside. The isolation of the pretentious villa from the cosy cottage was as complete as Robert Mason could make it. Add Mrs. Stapleton's years, Mrs. Mason's debility, and the "utter impossibility of young people travelling about," and it will be readily understood. Indeed Mrs. Stapleton was the only visitor from the old neighbourhood; but she did not cross more than once a month. The Forsyths *never*.

CHAPTER IX.

WHAT HESBA OVERHEARD.

"It is no use shedding tears over the inevitable, Frances. In your weak state it is excessively imprudent, and implies a doubt of my motives."

"Oh, no, Mr. Mason; but I had hoped——" What she had hoped was lost in the slightly sarcastic interruption.

"Oh, yes, Mrs. Mason, I know you had hoped and expected that your reckless and audacious son should be sent to college, and become a shining light either at the bar or in the pulpit!"

"It was his grandfather's wish, and I——" sobbed the lady addressed, more slight and fragile than when we saw her last, presiding at dinner parties and receiving the visits of her new husband's friends—the new husband who made capital of her delicacy, then more the effect of habit than reality. Now her delicate health was attested by her thin fingers as well as by the cushions supporting her languid head and the fleecy Shetland shawl in which she was closely wrapped, although the month was June and the fragrance of rose and jessamine floated in through the open casement, close to which her invalid-chair was drawn.

"But his *own* father's wish, Frances, expressed to *me*, his confidential friend, the very last time I saw the poor fellow alive and in my office, was that his son should follow his own profession and be trained to the sea as he had been; and for nothing but the sea is Brian fit," asserted Mr. Robert Mason, with more emphasis than was consistent with regard for her health, or the claims of veracity, as he confronted her from his seat behind the opposite lace curtain, with his elbows on his knees, the palms of his hands pressed together, and his body bent forward so as to bring face and voice nearer, and carry conviction to one not willing to be convinced.

Ignoring his closing remark, she replied feebly, yet with no lack of astonishment, "Dear me! His *father's?* Are you sure there is no mistake?" (She did not venture to say, "Are you

speaking the truth?") "Bri——Captain Stapleton promised me —I always understood—the boy's education was begun for a learned profes——"

"Quite a misconception of yours, Frances, I assure you." The speaker's furtive eyes half closed, and his hands separated until only the tips of fingers and thumbs were pressed together, as he went on, "In fact, Stapleton laughed as he said to me, 'Fan and the old folk have a notion to make either a doctor, or a lawyer, or a parson of the lad; but I've no love for any of the black-coats. I mean to make a seaman of him; a bluff, hearty, English sailor, to knock about the world with me; to be my mate in time, and my successor on the *Ariel* when I've lost my own sea-legs. I've begun his nautical education already. He can swim like a fish, and he's been his first voyage!' This is absolutely what he said. Crowe was present; he could confirm my statement were he here." The sinister-browed but handsome man watched every change of the countenance before him, and as he brought forward the lawyer's name to vouch for that which he knew to be dubious, the pressure of his opposing digits tightened as if illustrating the pressure brought to bear on the sick wife.

She shivered and shuddered; an icy chill came over her, but not from the open window; the cold breath of falsehood was playing upon her. Which of the men she had trusted and married was she to doubt? The frank, outspoken husband of her youth, who kept his Bible with his charts, and for a like use, or his plausible successor, whose silken glove began to have the hard, inflexible grip of an iron gauntlet?

"Incredible!" she murmured, "poor Brian would never have misled me so cruelly!"

"Thank you, madam, for the inference. That is generally incredible which we are not willing to believe;" and the words, cool, deliberate, incisive, cut like knives, though spoken with a smile.

"I presume the boy *has* been taught to swim, or he would not have spoiled a new suit of clothes last half by plunging head first into a muddy stream, reckless who paid for them?"

"Oh, Mr. Mason, that was to save a child's life!"

"And risk his *own*, regardless of mother or sister, or even that girl Mercy he is always running after; that is, supposing he had *not* been taught to swim. And of Master Brian's first voyage I

should think you needed no reminder, so long as that child remains a burden on our hands."

"Poor little Mercy!" sighed Mrs. Mason. "Dear Bri—" (Mr. Mason's black brows met.) She corrected herself: "Captain Stapleton never thought of her as a burden. He considered her preservation miraculous, and said that God had thrown the infant lovingly on our care, either in *mercy* to us or to the child, and that is why he called her Mercy. Brian might be a rough seaman, but he had a gentle heart."

In the tenderness of the reminiscence she had again forgotten that it was treason to speak of her dear drowned husband other than as Captain Stapleton.

It must have jarred on sensitive Mr. Mason, for he began with some asperity, though he softened as he proceeded, "He must have had a very thoughtless one to leave the helpless child of strangers on your hands whilst there were orphanages open for the reception of such waifs. It is not as though you were robust, Frances. You were never strong within my memory. And it is partly to save your nerves the harass of Brian's frolics and escapades that I have determined to send him to ——. I protest he is at the top of the great sycamore now!" and up bounced Mr. Mason, overturning his sick wife's footstool, and startling her nerves by a shout from the open window.

"Hallo! What are you doing there, you graceless monkey? Do you want to tear the clothes off your back, or break your neck?" a *sotto voce*, "No such luck!" inaudible to common ears, following as a commentary.

"Mercy's kite has caught in the tree, sir; I'm only disentangling the string," came as an answer to the stepfather, who by that time stood out on the iron balcony which ran along the front of the villa.

"Mercy's kite! A nice plaything for a young lady! But what can be expected with a great hulking lad for a playmate?"

He turned round as he spoke. Mrs. Mason had fainted!

Before a startled servant could obey the alarum which rang through the house and gardens, Hesba Stapleton, wherever she sprang from, was by her mother's side. She was now a bright, clear-eyed girl of some fifteen summers, the intense pain of whose cry, "Mamma! oh, dear, dear mamma!" was only equalled by the promptitude with which she snatched an eau-de-cologne bottle from a side-table and applied it to forehead

and lips, or the womanly decision with which she asked for sal volatile, and directed the ministrations of the scurrying and agitated maids.

In the wake of the domestics had rushed in her brother, the very counterpart of herself, with fearless front, a broad reflective forehead beneath his light-brown hair, on which the sunbeams seemed to glint and shimmer; a mouth not small, but mobile, above a firm round chin, and long blue-grey eyes, kept well apart by a nose sufficiently human to set off the face without statuesque classification.

At his heels came a little romp with a soiled pinafore and dark chestnut curls all in a tangle, trailing after her the tail of a home-made paper kite, whilst the other held the kite-string wound on a bit of stick.

Barely had the youth time for a glance towards the window or a hurried, "What's the matter? Oh, mamma!" than he was clutched by the collar and shaken with no gentle hand whilst the voice of his stepfather, apparently in great agitation, exclaimed, "This is all *your* doing, you young rascal! You will be the death of your mother if you remain here much longer!" the open-eared servants glancing at each other and wondering what it all meant.

"I do not think it was *his* doing, sir," put in Hesba, firmly but respectfully, and surely in one of the sweetest voices in the world, as she stood by her mother's chair, the drooping head resting on her bosom. "Mamma could not see either the tree or Brian from this seat; she must have been startled by your calling to him; or," she added, seeing the scowl on her stepfather's brow, "she may have fainted with the heat or the fatigue of conversation. But, hush-sh-sh, mamma is coming round, she opens her eyes do not disturb her."

"Disturb her! It is not *I* who disturb her. But I shall disturb someone before long," muttered the black-browed gentleman, angrily, as, with another shake, he released his step-son's collar, and stalked from the room. "A pretty hornet's nest I have married into: a sickly wife and refractory children." And his mutterings were not so low as to be inaudible this time.

And now, as though an ominous thunder-cloud had dispersed, the atmosphere of the room seemed clearer and freer.

Mrs. Mason, whose eyelids had once more closed, slowly revived, and looked wonderingly around, to find her beloved and

loving boy Brian kneeling at her feet, gently chafing one thin hand in his, and showing his deep anxiety in every feature; Hesba bending over her and watching just as anxiously, whilst little Mercy, with her pinafore to her eyes, was sobbing piteously as much for her "brother" as for her "mamma."

"It was not my fault, was it, mamma?" asked Brian then. "I should be so sorry if I had frightened you; I only climbed the tree for Mercy's kite, and was in no danger."

"No, my boy, no! Who said you were to blame?" and the mother's thin hand smoothed lovingly the shining locks, doubly disordered by the sycamore twigs and Mr. Mason's muscular salutation. And then she faltered forth, "I was fatigued—and troubled—and I think I was startled; that is all I remember. No, Brian, dear, it was not you."

"Hush, Brian, you must not talk. Mamma must be kept quiet. Help Ann to carry her to her own room," put in Hesba, with her finger to her lip, seeing that her brother was about to reply. "And, Mercy, dry your eyes, or I cannot let you stay here. You will make dear mamma worse," she whispered, stooping to the tearful child, as the strong-limbed housemaid and Brian carried Mrs. Mason in her chair to her own chamber across the wide landing, an apartment tastefully fitted up with all requirements for comfort, not to say luxury,

A dainty chintz, on the cream-white ground of which a sprinkling of rosebuds and forget-me-nots seemed to challenge nature, draped the brass bedstead, across the foot of which stretched a large soft-cushioned couch covered to match.

To this couch son and daughter both assisted their mother, and then Hesba, having thrown a fluffy fancy-work rug over her feet, proceeded to readjust the venetian blinds and the lace curtains lined with rose-hued tarlatan, which shaded the one large window, and cast over her pallid cheeks a warmer tinge. As she was doing this the housemaid and Brian slowly retreated, the latter only lingering to press an affectionate kiss on his mother's forehead.

On the threshold they encountered Mercy, with her tear-stained face and large brown eyes looking wistfully through the chink of the door, longing, yet afraid to enter; and coming so hurriedly in as to jostle and almost overturn the little damsel, and run full tilt against Brian, Mr. Mason, the impersonation of eager desire to be of service.

"So you have removed your mamma, I see, Hesba. I hope she was sufficiently recovered. Young girls should not take so much on themselves; they are apt to be rash. You should not have taxed your mamma's strength to walk from room to room immediately after a fainting fit."

"She did not walk. Brian and Ann brought her chair in very carefully, and without shaking."

There was again a slight contraction of the black brows, but he smoothed them, and his tongue also, as he said,

"Well, well, we shall hear what Dr. Mitchell says: I have despatched Joe for him. No doubt you did it for the best."

"I am sure she did, Mr. Mason, and I feel better for the change," put forth the invalid on behalf of her young nurse.

"I wish *I* was a doctor!" ejaculated Hesba, involuntarily, as she folded up the disused chair to set it aside.

"Hesba!" Mr. Mason's tone seemed to call her to order.

"Yes, I do," she added, though in a lower key. "I want to know what ails mamma, and what would cure her."

"You shall know that when Dr. Mitchell comes, Miss Stapleton," was his answer, in a tone as low, "and what he thinks of your unladylike wish. At present your mamma can dispense with your services; she appears drowsy, and *I* shall remain here."

The young girl had no alternative but to retire. She sought her brother, whom she found on a garden-seat under the sycamore endeavouring to soothe Mercy, inconsolable because "mamma" had neither kissed nor spoken to her.

"Mamma is asleep now. Perhaps Dr. Mitchell will permit you to kiss her when she awakens," said Hesba, drawing the dark tangle of chestnut curls to her own breast, perchance for mutual comfort.

Then she disburdened her mind of an oppressive secret.

"Brian, Mr. Mason has resolved to send you to sea!"

"To *sea!* Oh, you must be mistaken," and a shudder spoke the youth's repugnance.

"I am not mistaken. I had taken your Latin books into mamma's dressing-room to study the lesson you set me, in quiet. The window was open, and I sat down on the balcony itself with my feet in the room and my books on a chair. The drawing-room window was open too, and presently a sharp cry from poor mamma caught my ear in spite of my Latin, and I heard

her say, 'Brian has a horror of the sea—it swallowed up his father. It would be cruel,' and then, for I could not help but listen, I heard her sobbing, and Mr. Mason telling her that he had resolved to send you to sea because you did things to frighten her and make her ill, and that poor dear father had intended to make a sailor of you like himself—and I don't believe one syllable of it."

"Neither do I, Hesba," said the boy, boldly. "Father would never run off his word; and after the night of the terrible storm which brought Mercy to us, and gave me such a fright—I was but a little fellow then, you know—he vowed he would never risk the lives of his dear ones on a deck again. I heard him, and what *father* said might be trusted."

In her eagerness to acquaint her brother Hesba had overlooked the proverbial ears of little pitchers; but now she discovered that Mercy's ears were open as her own, and that Mercy's distress at the threatened severance of home ties was as acute, and less under control. But Mercy was somewhere about nine years old, and could be made to understand the necessity for silence, lest she should bring down the wrath of much-dreaded Mr. Mason on their three young heads, and a caution was sufficient to secure the inviolability of the twins' confidence.

And the confidences exchanged that day under the sycamore, called forth by what they considered a secret design to separate them from each other and to banish Brian from his mother, were serious as the occasion. The substitution of sea for college filled them with indignation and dismay. The prospect was too terrible for contemplation. Brian had a brave heart, but the sea was not his vocation. His family affections were strong, and latterly a hazy notion had floated through his brain that his sister—aye, and his mother—might need his protectorate as he grew older. "Only wait till I am a man!" had been the thought in his heart and the look in his eyes many a time and oft when the polite pressure of Robert Mason's will had crushed one or other under foot. "Only wait!" But Robert Mason had seen the look and read the heart; for was not Brian's face an index to his soul?

And now he was to be "sent to sea"—he who had been destined for so different a career. What did it mean? How was it to be averted? "It means that he is a coward and is afraid I shall turn round on him when I am old enough. And

I shall some day. He is making mamma and all of us miserable," said Brian. But the next question was not so easily answered. Many were the plans brought forward and abandoned; amongst the rest "running away." "Suppose you wrote to Grandma Stapleton?" at length suggested Hesba. "She might interfere."

Brian's prompt "So I will," was almost lost in the sound of approaching wheels. Dr. Mitchell's carriage was at the gate.

CHAPTER X.

IN CONSULTATION.

Dr. Mitchell was a grey-haired, elderly gentleman of sedate countenance, gentle voice and touch, a footfall like snow, and a ran-tan on a knocker that would startle a neighbourhood: not that he had taken out a patent for his particular ran-tan; doctors, as a rule, even when litter is laid in the roadway to deaden the sound of wheels, forget, until the threshold is crossed, that their patients have ultra-sensitive ears and nerves.

The peculiarity was that so loud and long a report should herald so small and undemonstrative an individual. Not that his prestige or his practice was small; and the ran-tan no doubt was part and parcel of these.

Hesba, knowing of old its effect on her mamma, no sooner caught sight of his brougham than, releasing herself from Mercy, she set off full-speed round to the back of the house, so as to pass through and anticipate him by opening the hall-door herself. No doubt she might also anticipate a lecture for hoydenish lack of dignity, and "a want of self-respect in performing the office of a menial," but what was the lecture to her when her mother was in question?

There was a merry twinkle in Dr. Mitchell's eyes as she asked him to "walk in," which seemed to indicate that his gravity was more professional than natural, and he saluted her with,

"Were you, then, the 'Atalanta of the flying feet' I saw chasing the wind round a corner just now?"

"Yes, sir;" and her cheeks were like twin roses as she spoke. "I was afraid lest mamma might faint again if you were to knock; she is so very easily startled."

"You are not afraid of giving *me* a sharp rap on the knuckles," he said drily, adding in another tone, "But you are quite right, young lady. I wish all daughters were as thoughtful."

At this moment Mr. Mason appeared at the head of the stairs, and as he in the most bland and suasive of voices invited the doctor to "step up," Hesba vanished.

There was a conference of some length carried on in low tones between the two gentlemen in the blue and gold drawing-room, from which Mrs. Mason had been carried, and which was almost as gorgeous in its every-day suit of crétonne as in its state robes of velvet-pile. And then there was another conference, scarcely less subdued, in the bedroom across the landing, where rosebuds and forget-me-nots predominated, again another between the gentlemen in the drawing-room, and then Miss Hesba was summoned to confer with Dr. Mitchell. She had returned to the garden, hoping to intercept him on his way out, and ask his opinion of her mamma. And lo! here was Mr. Mason sending for her to meet him. What could it mean?

Previously to her return to Brian and Mercy, Hesba had hastily removed the traces of the child's rough embraces and of her own tears, and Dr. Mitchell thought, as she stood framed for an instant in the pale blue and gold doorway of that spacious drawing-room, which, like the dining-room below, ran from front to back of the house, what a pleasant picture she made in her simple morning dress of common holland, with those clear grey eyes of hers, that well-poised head, and the air of womanly decision that sat so well upon her.

A seat had been placed for the doctor where Mrs. Mason's folding chair had previously stood, Mr. Mason again occupying the low lounge which had the sycamore full in view.

Both rose on her entrance, the latter, most polite when most mischievous, resigning his seat to her as he said, with his smile of many meanings, "Dr. Mitchell has kindly consented to give you the information you were anxious to obtain," and at once retreated to the other window at the extreme end of the long room, where he stood with his back towards them, apparently contemplating the asparagus beds and currant bushes in the kitchen garden.

"I understand, Miss Stapleton," began the doctor, gravely, as she drew near, "that you are anxious to learn the cause of your mamma's illness."

He paused as she bent forward with a low but eager "Oh, yes!"

"Perhaps you will scarcely be prepared to learn that the predisposing cause is *worry?*"

"Worry!" echoed Hesba, dropping on the lounge against which she had stood.

"Yes, *worry*—worry acting on a weak heart and a delicate constitution."

Hesba had heard of her mother's "heart" and her "delicacy" ever since she could remember; but "worry"—that was a new disease! She looked her perplexity.

"Yes, young lady; and I hear, moreover, that it is her children who worry her."

"*We!* doctor?" And Hesba's clear eyes sought his in open questioning. "We would die to save mamma!"

"No doubt, if a sudden personal sacrifice were called for; but the daily sacrifice of wills and tempers is not so easily understood or made, and from what I can gather, the rebellion of her children against their stepfather's authority is the primary cause of her anxiety and unhappiness."

Hesba's lips blanched; she clasped her hands tightly together in her lap as she listened, not daring to reply for fear of the *ears* at the more distant window.

"I am told," he went on, "that Miss Mercy is not to be schooled into ladylike propriety, plays like a boy with marbles, tops, and kites, and defaces the clean steps and walls by drawing on them with ruddle picked out of the gravel; that Master Stapleton is always in some scrape or other, climbs and breaks his limbs, fights with his schoolfellows, and comes home with black eyes, plunges into muddy water, and comes in soaking, plays truant, is in disgrace with his masters, has low associates, makes Miss Mercy a tomboy, and, finally, that you, Miss Hesba, aid and abet this wickedness"—there was a twinkle in the corner of the doctor's eyes, though voice and manner were grave—"rebelling against the punishment of the incorrigibles, and it is this general opposition to authority, especially to that of your kind stepfather, which keeps your poor mother in a state of excitement, and preys injuriously on her nerves."

Hesba had kept her lips as closely pressed together as her palms: years seemed to crowd and grow upon her as she listened. She rose to her feet, choked emotion down, and took her interlocutor by surprise with her prompt reply.

"You are right, Dr. Mitchell; mamma *is* kept in a state of excitement, but not altogether as you have been told. You have heard that Brian startled her this morning with climbing the sycamore?" (A nod in assent.) "Can you see the sycamore from your seat? It stands where mamma's did?"

He shook his head.

"Mr. Mason from *this* chair *could*." (She laid her hand on the back.) "It was *he* who startled poor mamma, with *his* sudden start and outcry to Brian."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, sir, I was in the adjoining dressing-room, or rather half in and half out on the balcony, and *I* heard."

"Soh!" was the long-drawn comment of the doctor in an undertone, as Hesba went on firmly,

"All the *other* things you have been told, sir, are about as true. I do not think mamma is *worried* by her *children;*" and an involuntary glance up the room said the rest.

If Mr. Mason heard, he made no sign; perhaps he felt he had made a miscalculation.

"Well, well, my dear," replied the physician, kindly, as he rose to depart, "be that as it may, my patient, your mamma, must be kept from excitement at any cost, or I will not answer for the consequences. I daresay she will recover from this attack, and perhaps from the next, but some day the frail thread will snap suddenly—so strained."

"You hear, Hesba," said Mr. Mason, coming from the window. "I hope you are satisfied—and you, too, doctor?"

"Oh, yes, I am satisfied," said the doctor, drily, and took his eave.

Hesba had vanished. The storm of indignation in her breast had given place to fears for her beloved mother, and the "at any cost" rang in her ears like a knell. Only in her own room could she obtain sufficient mastery over herself to fit her for her mother's presence, or to lay before Brian the dread alternative Dr. Mitchell had presented.

Mr. Robert Mason was late at his office that day. He, too, had heard Dr. Mitchell's opinion, and had had time to ponder it, little to his satisfaction, during his walk and his short railway-ride from Edge Hill to Lime Street. It was true he had loved the woman he had married, even when she was Fanny Bayliss; and if disappointment and jealousy, and money-getting, had warped the man, there was something not wholly mercenary in his marriage and his feeling towards her—not the children. If his wife were really in danger, how could he carry out his plans with regard to Brian; and if Brian remained in England, whether he went to college or not, he would be called upon to open his

pockets pretty freely, and be told it was the lad's own money into the bargain. If he was fool enough to risk so many thousands upon one venture, and had kept them in his own hands by his marriage, he had a right to keep them. And what if he had secured against the loss of his thousands by reinsurance? that was a matter of business, and concerned neither Brian nor Dr. Forsyth. And no Dr. Forsyth could prevent him sending Brian to sea, and once apprenticed—well, there were a thousand chances against *his* claiming heirship.

And under all this a still, small, *very* small voice persecuted him with the questioning, could *he* be wholly blameless if past excitement had brought his wife into this peril? and who would be to blame if the "frail thread snapped" under fresh excitement?

He had not a very tender conscience, but sufficient to send him to his office in anything but an amiable frame of mind for a model husband and stepfather.

There was when he arrived there a strong smell of decidedly genuine Havannah in the outer office, where a gamesome office-boy, sportively ducking out of the way of an equally gamesome clerk's ruler, almost "pitched the governor over" as he entered.

"Who has been here?"

It did not make Robert Mason more amiable to be told by the clerk, a nephew of his own, now all sedate, that a very impatient Captain Somebody had called, and not finding him had gone straightway to a rival shipbroker on the other side of Castle Street, and that Captain Mawson had been there also, swearing like a trooper at having been kept waiting at Mr. Crowe's half-an-hour over some indentures, and that if Mr. Mason was not there in the morning at ten o'clock sharp he would tear the indentures up and not have the lad aboard a ship of his.

"Let him tear them up, I've changed my mind," muttered the shipbroker as he took the morning letters from his clerk and went into the inner office with an ugly frown on that handsome face of his.

Sad was the consultation in the so-called schoolroom which followed the stepfather's departure for town, Hesba having considered it her duty to lay the opinion of Dr. Mitchell before Brian and Mercy, and to supplement it with her own that they must be more particular to conciliate their stepfather if possible, for their mother's sake.

"But how can we, Hesba?" said Brian, cogently. "You know we are *not* disobedient; it is only he who makes us seem so. And I think he put the doctor up to saying that, just to frighten me into going off to sea quietly."

"Oh, Brian! don't say that. Dr. Mitchell would never lend himself to such a wicked thing."

"Well, perhaps not, Hesba; but *he* wouldn't mind doing it, I know!"

(Mr. Mason was rarely more than a pronoun in the schoolroom.)

"But you wouldn't go away and leave *me* and Hesba, would you, Brian?" cried Mercy in affright, coming up to him and looking into his face pitifully with her large brown eyes all wet.

"Not unless I am *forced*. I should never know what was being done to you, or Hesba either, if I was out of the way," was Brian's answer, to which he added, with a gesture of resolute purpose,

"But only wait till I am a man, and then we'll see!"

Not very explicit, this, but desperate in its vagueness, and Mercy looked her satisfaction. Yet little satisfaction would there have been for any one of the three could they have known all Brian would have to see before his manhood came.

Hesba had been turning over her desk in quest of paper, of which they had but a scant supply. "Now, Brian, sit down and write your letter to grandma quickly," she said; "tell her what I heard, and how ill mamma is, and what doctor says, and ask her please to come. I must go to mamma, and will be back before you have finished."

She stole into the chamber on tiptoe, found her mother in a tranquil sleep on the couch, though there was a tear on her soft eyelash, and back she went as gently upstairs to the schoolroom with her report.

"I think we had better not tell mamma of our letter," suggested Hesba, as Brian folded it up for lack of an envelope; "if she knows nothing about it, she cannot get blamed for what we have done."

"Aye, and he is sure to question mamma if grandma does come," assented Brian, rising to reach his straw hat. "But what are we to do for a postage stamp? We can't ask the servants, they would tell."

This was a poser.

"Write on it, 'Without a stamp;' grandma will understand," suggested Hesba; and then Brian, with the letter hidden, sauntered into the garden and out at the gate, and, once clear of the house, pelted through the hot sun to the post-office, and came back broiling.

But the letter was gone, and grandma was safe to get it that night.

CHAPTER XI.

TO BE OR NOT TO BE?

For at least three months Hesba had presided at the breakfast-table, at first as a temporary relief to her mother, whose strength was giving way, latterly as her substitute, Mrs. Mason's apology for a breakfast being taken in bed.

There was a calm, self-possessed dignity about Hesba which well fitted her for the office. She was never flurried, and consequently avoided the customary mistakes and accidents of inexperience, and she gave her few brief orders with an unassuming natural ease and certainty which made rebellion against "so young a missis" next to an impossibility.

Even Mercy took her bread and milk decorously, lest she should in some way compromise her guarantor.

It was not an easy post, with those black eyes of Mr. Mason taking the circuit of the table from under their bushy brows as if he watched his opportunity for sarcastic fault-finding. Such eyes, waiting on a tongue as keen, are apt to take the edge off appetite, in spite of snow-white napery, polished silver, rich porcelain, and tempting viands; and for a long while Brian could never make a breakfast sufficient for a growing lad.

There were naturally some misgivings in the breasts of all three as they took their places the morning following the posting of the letter.

To their surprise and relief, so self-absorbed was their stepfather that when they rose as usual to salute him on his entrance a curt nod was all the notice he took. There was no sneer at an ill-brushed jacket, a collar awry, a fluttering string, a missing button, a refractory curl, a clinking spoon, or falling crumbs. They certainly had been extra particular, but he was not. He slowly swallowed the coffee Hesba poured out, and ate a savoury omelette with an air of unwonted abstraction, glancing once or twice at the marble timepiece on the sideboard and then at Brian, apparently more from force of habit than of observation. All at once, as if from some change of plan or purpose, he hurried his breakfast to a conclusion, almost jumped from his seat,

pulled down his waistcoat, and, as if in desperate haste to catch a train, snatched his hat and gloves from Brian, calling to Hesba as he went, "Tell Dr. Mitchell I regret I could not await his visit this morning."

No sooner was he fairly out of the gate than Mercy clapped her hands and Brian cut a caper of delight; even from less demonstrative Hesba broke a smiling sigh of satisfaction.

They would have been much less satisfied could they have known that Mr. Mason had been debating between his appointment with Dr. Mitchell and that of Captain Mawson, and wherefore?

Deliberate in his movements as a rule, it chafed Mr. Mason to hurry through the heat and dust, take a smart run at last, and —miss his train by half-a-minute. But it chafed him still more to be assailed by the coarse bluster and offensive epithets of Captain Mawson on the very steps of Mr. Crowe's office, when at length he arrived there some ten minutes behind time. The captain had evidently been drinking hard all night, and the innate brutality of the man was visible in his face, heard in his voice, as, like bullets from a steam-gun, he poured forth a volley of oaths, demanding who Mr. Mason was that he should keep *him* waiting? Why was not the young scamp with him? He wasn't going to dance attendance one day after another; wasn't going to the owners to sign indentures or anything else till he had safe hold of the lad and his share of the cash; winding up by throwing his half-smoked end of cigar almost in Mr. Mason's face.

Little Mr. Crowe hopped about his office, papers in hand, in great perturbation, fearing a personal encounter; but Mr. Mason was not the man to risk his composure or his credit in a fight with a drunken skipper.

With preternatural coolness, therefore, he flicked the cigar ashes from his coat, and in his cold, incisive tones, which were heard through all the other's bluster, said, "You will not be required to sign those indentures, sir; I have changed my mind since I entered this office. For the boy's sake I now decline to send him out with you."

Without another word Robert Mason quitted the lawyer's office for his own, to all appearance as imperturbable a gentleman as when he entered. Yet was there considerable agitation beneath the surface. He told himself he should be as great a

brute as Mawson if he were to hand over Brian to him after what he had seen and heard; and, careful of his spotless reputation on 'Change as of his spotless raiment, he feared lest his private arrangement with the brutal captain should ooze out. It was as much for his own sake as for the boy's that he had resented the personal indignity after such fashion in the presence of Crowe and his clerks.

Yet Robert Mason little thought what a service he had rendered his stepson when he shouted to him in the sycamore. He had alarmed his wife, it is true, but he had been in consequence detained until he missed his appointment. Had he met the skipper the previous day—when he was somewhat less offensive—Brian's fate would have been sealed.

"I thought your papa would have waited until Dr. Mitchell came," said Mrs. Mason to Hesba, after the latter had assisted her to rise and dress, and was helping the faltering feet across the landing to the drawing-room, where a couch had been drawn near the large window for her accommodation. But she seemed so fully content to meet the medical man alone, that it is just possible she, too, felt the presence of Mr. Mason a restraint.

As Hesba adjusted her cushions and shawl with light and delicate touch, the pale mother drew the young face down to hers and kissed it. "You are a dear, good girl," she said; "that will do nicely. And now where is Brian?"

"I think he is putting up a swing for Mercy in the back garden," was the reply.

"And where is Mercy? I should like to see them both."

Mercy answered the question in person, coming in almost at a run with a handful of flowers arranged with much natural taste.

"See, dear mamma, I have gathered these for you. Are they not beautiful? Here is a moss-rose and a maiden's blush, and here are some lovely little roses of the Persian briar; and here, see this white azalea and this blue 'nemophilia,' Stevens calls it, and see, I have put a border of forget-me-nots all round, so that you will be sure to remember me."

"Yes, my darling, they are very beautiful, and very sweet remembrancers; but I am afraid Mr. Mason will not like your gathering so many of his flowers."

"Not for *you*, mamma?" and Mercy opened her eyes. "Stevens (the gardener) said I might have them."

"Ah, little sunbeam, Stevens does not——" Mrs. Mason

checked herself, and continued: "Let me give you a kiss for your flowers, and then Hesba will put them in a vase for my table."

Brian was in the room; a tap at the window by Hesba had brought him. A faint flush of pleasure overspread the mother's face. "Oh, Brian, my boy, I am so pleased to see you," and a thin hand went out to meet his warm clasp, as he, too, bent down to meet the ready kiss. "I hope you did not think *you* frightened me yesterday?"

"I hope I did not, mamma. And you must not let us fatigue you this morning."

"But I want to speak to you about something which concerns——"

"Yes, I know, dear mamma; but you really must not talk, and here is the doctor's carriage," said he, repressing his own desire to know more of that which concerned him so nearly.

Hesba was downstairs and had the door open in readiness. Dr. Mitchell smiled.

"So, young lady," said he, "you seemed determined I shall not give my professional rat-tat-tat-tattoo on *your* knocker. And how is our patient this morning?"

"Better, sir," answered Hesba, who then gave Mr. Mason's message, and followed the doctor upstairs.

He saw his patient; saw her with her children around her, chatted awhile with them on seemingly irrelevant topics, elicited that, except during vacations, the mother saw little of her children, that Master Brian, in addition to his own studies, was teaching Hesba Latin and mathematics, and drawing to Mercy, consequently could not have much time or taste for the reckless exploits on which Mr. Mason had laid so much stress, and all the while the doctor kept his eye on his patient, occasionally, as if in abstraction, laying a finger on her pulse. Then he dismissed them, bidding Hesba await his coming in the sitting-room below; where, after a while, he joined her, to find that in the meantime two other visitors had arrived who were equally anxious to confer with him, and whose coming had set Brian and Mercy wild with delight, Hesba alone retaining her composure, though not less moved.

Mr. Forsyth was known to Dr. Mitchell by repute as the author of one or two recent medical works and a rising man in his profession, and the elder gentleman expressed his pleasure at this casual meeting, claiming also preknowledge of Mrs. Stapleton,

having spent an agreeable evening or two with Dr. Stapleton at Larch Cottage some thirty years before.

This led to conversation, Mr. Forsyth stating that a "rumour" had reached Woodside that Mr. Mason was about to send his stepson to sea; and having been left guardian to the boy, who was to have been articled to him as a pupil, according to Captain Stapleton's will (which had strangely disappeared), he considered it his duty to the boy and to the late captain to accompany Mrs. Stapleton thither, and ascertain how far "rumour" was correct, and, if correct, to remonstrate with the stepfather.

Dr. Mitchell appeared surprised. He had understood that Captain Stapleton himself had wished to make a seaman of the lad, and that Master Brian's hair-breadth escapes and misconduct were hurrying his good mother to the grave.

"Nothing of the kind, sir," put in grandma; "we will call Hesba and question her." And Hesba so questioned gave such a different face to Mr. Mason's "facts" that Brian shone forth a young hero instead of a young ruffian. For the "black eye" previously cited was the result of his defence of a little lame match-seller with whose cap and crutch a big blackguard of a school-fellow had run off; when he spoiled his clothes he had saved a child's life, and so on.

"Aweel, doctor," quoth James Forsyth, handing his snuff-box to the other, "there is something unco' questionable aboot a stepfather wha wad send a puir lad to sea wi' an ill name, the whiles he holds the stepson's siller in his hands an' renders nae account."

This seemed a new light to Dr. Mitchell, who looked grave as he said, "Yes, so I think; yet Mr. Mason certainly told me, and not by any means as a secret, that Master Brian was to sail this week with a Captain Mawson in the *Regia*."

Mrs. Stapleton started to her feet aghast. "Oh! you don't say so! There is not a greater brute in the service. He could never commit Brian's boy to that wretch."

"Aweel, if he does, I'll make Leeverpool too het to hold him," was James Forsyth's declaration, after which remark Dr. Mitchell remembered his carriage.

Poor Mrs. Mason wept on the warm bosom of Grandma Stapleton, confiding to her the fear she had that Brian was to be sent to sea, and her own powerlessness to prevent it. "She

was afraid, too," she said, "that Hesba and Mercy were not going back to school, that Mr. Mason objected to the expense."

"Then I will pay for them," said grandma, "if he is so mean."

She and Mr. Forsyth went away after luncheon, leaving behind the promise that "no stone should be left unturned to keep Brian from the sea;" and carrying away with them the mother's assurance "that no better or more affectionate children ever lived."

Before she went, grandma asked Hesba if she had ever opened Mercy's bundle whilst it lay in the nursery-cupboard; and, being answered in the negative, both by her and Brian, informed them that Mercy's sleeve-bands with the gold clasps were gone, and must have been stolen. She had not missed them until she went to put fresh camphor with the things.

Straightway to Castle Street went James Forsyth and Mrs. Stapleton.

Courteous and cold was their reception, only becoming more frigidly polite as the purpose of the visit was made known. Mr. Mason threw himself back in his chair, his elbows resting on the arms, his expanded finger tips meeting, his lips smiling, his black brows bridging his sharp nose.

He admitted nothing, he denied nothing. He simply questioned the right of either Dr. Forsyth or Mrs. Stapleton to interfere in his domestic matters. He had married a wife encumbered with three children, one a mere foundling, and required no one's dictation what he should do with them.

"Or with their money either, I suppose?" cried James Forsyth, waxing warm.

"Mr. Forsyth, this is my office, Brian Stapleton's mother is my wife; I become joint guardian of her children. When you can produce the mythical *will* I may be prepared to acknowledge your authority, your right to claim my stepson as a pupil—not before. Nor do I account for any moneys which came to me with my wife to any but a legal claimant."

"You will have to account to some one if you send the heir to those moneys off to sea, and with a man like Captain Mawson," said James Forsyth, stoutly.

At the mention of the captain's name Mr. Mason's face changed. He touched a gong on the table. "Mr. Capper," said he to the clerk who responded, "go to Mr. Crowe's and ask him to be so good as to step in here."

Mr. Crowe came like a puppet when the wire is pulled.

"There was a scene in your office yesterday, Mr. Crowe, when a certain Captain Mawson assailed me coarsely for refusing to send my stepson to sea under him, he holding, as he said, the promise of the boy's father. Will you oblige me by saying to these friends of Mrs. Mason if this was true or not?"

"True? I thought the captain would have knocked you down; his abuse is not to be repeated. Certainly, you refused to send the boy."

"You hear this, sir. Perhaps you will hesitate to give 'rumour' so ready credence in the future. Good morning."

"Yes, I hear and I understand; but ye've not heard the last o' Jamie Forsyth, Mr. Mason. Come, Mrs. Stapleton, the air is purer out of doors."

And they went, having done nothing by their well-meant interposition but give a spur to flagging intent.

CHAPTER XII.

PARTED.

When Mr. Mason reached his office the next morning he found little Mr. Crowe perambulating the flags between their separate offices with two open newspapers in his hand.

"I say, Mason, here's something that concerns you!" he began, thrusting into the other's hand the *Liverpool Daily Post*. "What does it mean?" and a finger, just like a claw, pointed to an advertisement which stood prominently out.

"Fifty Pounds Reward: Missing Will.—The above reward will be given to anyone producing, or giving information which shall lead to the recovery of, the Will of Brian Stapleton, sea-captain, of the ship *Ariel*, and Woodside, Cheshire, bearing date June, 1860.—Answer to Vera, office of this paper."

Mr. Mason's face darkened as he read; but a keen, sharp gleam was in his eyes as the *Liverpool Courier* was substituted for the *Post*, and again the claw served as a pointer.

"Reward offered for the present address of a girl named Dinah Smart, formerly in service at Larch Cottage, Woodside. The girl has a dark skin, black hair and eyes, a large head on a very diminutive body, and is very dressy.—Answer to Mrs. S., Larch Cottage, Woodside."

"What does it mean?" said Mr. Mason, like an echo. "Why, it means that I shall pack Master Brian off by the next vessel Sparling and Grove clear out. There is a menace in those advertisements. They mean to have the will if money can tempt Dinah to turn it out. That she has it is a dead certainty."

"Can *we* not ferret her out without advertising?" suggested Mr. Crowe, with his head on one side.

"We can try; but the cunning jade had no label on her box when she left her place. The cabman drove her only to the ferry, a strange man shouldered her box on the Liverpool side, and all clue was lost."

"Then you never thought of advertising for a servant, or of visiting the registry offices?" and the little quick black head went knowingly on one side again.

"No; it did not occur to me—was not worth while. I had my suspicions of the girl, and merely meant to keep my eye on her. *Now* I mean business."

So it appeared. Before the afternoon the pair had had an interview with Messrs. Sparling and Grove, shipowners, and when Robert Mason rode home that Wednesday evening he was in a brown study how best to unfold to his wife that her son —her one only son—was to be torn from her on the Saturday, and sent off to sea. He did not trouble himself much how he should break the ill news to Brian himself or to his twin-sister. It was to be, and the sooner it was over the better, was his sole idea.

Yet he thought proper to wait until the last good night was said, and Hesba, now her mother's chief attendant, had seen the thin face laid calmly on her pillow, and left all comfortable for the night, parting with a mutual kiss and caress.

He had been smoking a cigar on the balcony. As Hesba mounted the higher flight of stairs to the so-called schoolroom, where the three usually sat when Mr. Mason was at home, he flung away his cigar and followed.

There Mercy, half asleep, sat with her head against Brian's shoulder, waiting for her sister, whilst he, sitting close to the uncurtained dormer window with his arms folded, looked dreamily up at the silvery moon, towards which a dark cloud was slowly stealing, and in a vague sort of way wondered if the cloud which threatened to darken his life would come as stealthily and surely on, or glide past.

Alas! When the cloud touched the moon's bright rim the foot of trouble was on the stair, and ere half the shining disc was blotted out, the room was darkened by the unwonted presence of Mr. Mason.

In very few and brief words he announced to Brian that he had been destined for the sea by his dead father, who had hoped to find in him a worthy successor; that after several disappointments, he had succeeded in finding a good opening for him, and, that as the vessel was to sail on Saturday, he expected he would be ready to accompany him to town in the morning, to be introduced to the owners and to Captain Lever, as he would have to join his ship on the Friday.

Be sure he had not said all this without interruption. Brian had started to his feet on his entrance, rousing Mercy, who, no

sooner wakened to comprehension, than she clung to his arm as if he were to be torn from her that moment.

Hesba, too, moved closer to him, putting on a brave front, though a sense of hopelessness was creeping round her heart.

"Oh, sir, I was to be a surgeon: was to study under Mr. Forsyth. You cannot surely mean to make a common sailor of me?" cried Brian.

"That depends upon yourself. Your indentures will provide that you shall be instructed in navigation. You have only to use your opportunities well, and promotion will come when apprenticeship ceases."

"But my brother has an aversion to the sea, sir. You surely would not force him on shipboard against his will?" urged Hesba, in evident pain.

"I do not allow young people to have wills of their own. The matter is settled, and there is no more to be said."

"But mamma!" exclaimed Hesba and Brian, in a breath. "Surely she will never consent?"

"Mrs. Mason has no will but mine;" and the thin lips tightened.

"It will kill her to part with Brian," pleaded Hesba, with her hands clasped. "Oh, Mr. Mason, do not take him from us—do not be so cruel."

"It is in *kindness* I am removing him. And, unless you excite your mother by outcries and opposition, she will take no harm," and so he left them.

Brian had buried his face in his arms on the table, his breast heaving with emotion, and Mercy flung an arm round his neck, sobbing in a passion of grief. There is a contagion in tears, and Hesba's flowed freely too, though she strove to choke them back, the better to console the child and her darling brother.

There they sat far into the night, after Mercy had cried herself to sleep, devising plans—not to move their iron-willed stepfather — but of escape. They planned, only to reject as impossible, and likely to bring greater sorrow to the mother both loved so dearly. There was nothing for it, as Mr. Mason had said, but to bow to the inevitable; and, that conceded, Brian was not of the mettle to flinch or to show the white feather. If he must go to sea he would go bravely, as his father had gone.

His tender heart ached for those he would leave behind,

fearing harsh measures for them also. But here, Hesba strengthened him with her own fearlessness, and with her conviction that Mercy had not been preserved from the waves to be cast adrift on shore. She herself was old enough to take care of Mercy, and he must not forget their grandmother, who would be sure to stand by them, she said.

Then she began to talk hopefully of his return after his first voyage, and how much he and they would be changed. And then they knelt down together as in the old nursery days, the very trustfulness of prayer bringing with it healing and strength.

Brian was not allowed to see his mother in the morning. She had had a bad night, Mr. Mason said, was asleep, and must not be disturbed. He did not say that he had driven repose from her pillow by his "advantageous arrangements" for her son.

And, as if he feared some attempt to escape, Mr. Mason never had his eye or his hand off the boy the whole of the busy day.

Brian found the shipowners agreeable gentlemen, Captain Lever rather facetious than formidable, the outfitters (who were ordered to furnish his kit with every requisite) most obliging, and he began to relent towards his stepfather when the latter turned into a photographer's, and Brian was required to sit for his portrait, not only in his ordinary garb, but in the sailor suit brought in a parcel for the purpose. Such had been the request of his mamma, for whom the *cartes-de-visite* were intended, so he was told.

Robert Mason did not say that the promise of photographs had been made, as one offers sweets to a child, to reconcile his wife to that which was unpalatable, or what a terrible night of anguish had been hers.

Hesba saw it, however, as soon as she cast her eyes on her mother's face; and, fearful of consequences, she stifled down her own emotions with a resolute will, laid strict injunctions on the sobbing Mercy "not to let mamma see her crying," and endeavoured to appear busied in preparations for Brian's departure and the selection of souvenirs for him to carry away, so as to keep up her mother's sinking heart.

It was a bright thought of hers. It nerved Mrs. Mason to rise from her bed, and search for a locket in which a braid of their blended hair was to be encased; it enabled her to sit up whilst she wrote in a letter to her son those words of farewell and advice she might have no opportunity to speak, but which,

clasped in her own Bible, might pass into his hands and have double weight.

And it kept Mercy quiet, stitching hard and fast at "a thread-and-needle case for her brother," such as Hesba had once made for her father, into one pocket of which a chestnut curl ruthlessly shorn went on completion.

But neither souvenirs, nor photographs, nor nerve could make the final parting anything but a terrible wrench. To Hesba it seemed as if half her life was going, and to the mother—well, Joe had to be sent flying for Dr. Mitchell before Mr. Mason could smile complacently across a railway carriage at Brian and his carpet-bag.

Joe, a lad about the age of Brian, indignant at the sudden spiriting away of young master, had carried more than a bare message to the doctor's, and the grey-haired gentleman had no need to ask a reason for the red eyes he encountered at the door and on the stairs.

He shook his head gravely as he turned from Mrs. Mason's bedside, and having asked for writing materials, he penned something besides a prescription; a something which found its way to the post-office a few minutes later, and to Woodside before the night wore out.

Surely it must have been that same something which carried Mrs. Stapleton and Mr. Forsyth and Willie down to the docks and across a couple of barques to gladden the heart of Brian that Saturday morning before he sailed away over the wide ocean, and made him feel that he was not utterly deserted. As he advanced to meet them, his grandma thought and said, "Brian, my dear, it brings back old times to look upon you *here*, in that dress. You seem the very picture of your own father when he was a boy, and went his first voyage. I hope you will be as brave a sailor and as good a man."

"I hope so too, grandma," he said, as he took her hand. "I shall have to conquer my horror of the sea, I know. But I will never disgrace you, be sure of that. And oh, grandma, do watch over Mamma, and Hesba, and Mercy. It is for them I am afraid."

"Watch over them! That I will, as far as I can," was her answer.

"I will go and see your mither this very day. And we have advertised for your father's will, my lad," put in Mr. Forsyth.

"If we recover it we may have good news for you on your return. Your indentures would be just so much waste paper if that were found. So keep up your speerits, an' do your duty to God and your captain."

"I will try, sir," said Brian, modestly.

A few coins and much good advice were given him to start with. Willie and he exchanged promises of mutual remembrance, and, standing by the capstan in earnest conversation, the flight of time and the bustle on shipboard were alike unregarded.

All at once the voice of Captain Lever, no longer facetious, but sharp, sung out a command to clear the deck of all strangers, and, turning, they became aware that Mr. Mason, with his lips set close as his eyebrows, stood at Captain Lever's elbow by the gangway.

There was nothing for it but to wring the young sailor's hand once more, and leave him with good wishes and a blessing, renewing promises to watch over Hesba and Mercy in his absence. Their unexpected presence must have surprised Robert Mason—the affectionate parting seemed to sting him.

"*Rumour* seems to fly fast, Mr. Forsyth," said he, with a sneer, as they were leaving the brig.

"It had need, sir, when iniquity is afoot!" exclaimed Mrs. Stapleton, indignation drying her humid eyes. "There is nothing fleeter than mischief—except it be God's justice!" and she looked him full in the face.

"Not faster than the villany that ships a braw lad oot of the way without the knowledge or consent of his friends," was the surgeon's simultaneous reply, in tones which, like those of Mrs. Stapleton, reached other ears than those of Mr. Mason's, ears that did not sail away with the *Dolphin*, but went back amongst shipowners and shipbrokers and underwriters, the very people Mr. Mason was most desirous to stand well with. And ere long, as if those ears had been in league with some other potent agent, rumour was flying in mysterious whispers on 'Change, amongst shippers and shipowners; and, as if that "rumour" had been an invisible moth, Mr. Mason's superfine black coat became fretted with holes, so minute he only discovered the damage when too late.

Men who remembered Captain Stapleton began to couple his name with the advertisements for the missing will and the maid Dinah, as they cropped up from time to time, first in one

local paper, then another, irritating the shipbroker like wasps or mosquitoes.

It was all very well for Mr. Crowe to maintain that every insertion proclaimed failure; *he* knew that they also proved a vigorous determination not to be beaten. Moreover, Mr. Crowe had himself to admit failure, no such girl as Dinah Smart being on the books of any servants' registry in the district.

So the wheels Mr. Mason had oiled for his own convenience did not run too smoothly with him; a shake here and a jolt there reminded him that there were ruts on the road he was travelling, in which a vehicle like his might upset perilously some day.

Meanwhile Brian was gone—the blithe voice, the springy step were heard no more about the pretentious villa; the strong young fellow, always ready to lend a helping hand to Stevens or Joe, or even to the maids, might be looked for in vain; Mercy's young drawing-master had departed, and with him had gone Hesba's instructor in Latin and mathematics.

For a few days study languished, not longer; Hesba did her best to supply her brother's place to Mercy, urging his wish as the strongest incentive to application; for herself, she needed no spur, study to her was a pleasure and a necessity, but the hope of pleasing Brian on his return burned strong within her, and urged to overcome difficulties.

Soon, however, the twain had other teachers. Mrs. Stapleton "braved the black-bogie in his den" with an offer to "relieve him of the cost of both girls' education." "Hesba is my grandchild, Mr. Mason, and I hold it a duty incumbent on me to see her uncommon talents properly cultivated and developed. Cost to me would be a secondary consideration. To you, as she is not your own kin, it might be."

Mr. Mason, with his finger tips pressed together before him, as he sat listening behind his handsome office table, bent his head forward in acquiescence to her last observation. She went on,

"With respect to Mercy, as she was the child of my son's adoption, I can but regard her as a sacred trust, and hold myself responsible for such an education as may fit her for the future. She has certainly no such claim on you."

At first he was undecided whether to treat the offer as a jest or an insult. In Mercy's case he had no reasonable grounds

for refusal. "Nobody's child might be paid for by anybody who felt disposed, *he* did not."

"Claim, madam!" he said, superciliously. "I should think not; she is but an encumbrance. If you care to throw away your coin on her education, you are at liberty to do so; I do not."

"And Hesba?" urged Mrs. Stapleton, but not with like result.

For Hesba he refused point-blank. "She is more advanced than young ladies in general are at her age, and may improve herself at her leisure," he said. "Besides, her services are required at home whilst Mrs. Mason continues indisposed. For so young a girl she has really proved a most efficient nurse, and Dr. Mitchell prefers her to a hired attendant."

There was no gainsaying the truth that Hesba's first duty was towards her mother, and Mrs. Stapleton was silenced.

"Indisposed!" Mrs. Mason was something more than that. She was ill; had not rallied properly after parting with her son; and Dr. Mitchell's carriage was often at the gate.

He had noted Hesba's promptitude and unflagging activity, her patient devotion, her tenderness and thought, her elasticity and cheeriness of spirit in the sick room, and was full of admiration. One day he chanced to find her puzzling out a Latin exercise whilst her mother was sleeping. He remembered that she had lost her young teacher, and asked how she would like an old one. And so it came about that Hesba found a tutor where her mother found a physician, and Mr. Mason could only bite his lips and take the favour with what grace he could.

CHAPTER XIII.

A NEW INMATE.

SEVERAL weeks went by. One morning Ann opened the door for Dr. Mitchell. She had her left hand enveloped in a great cloth like a huge boxing-glove.

"Hey-day, what have you been doing?"

"Scalded myself with hot coffee, sir."

"Much?"

"Pretty badly, sir."

"What have you applied?"

"Miss Stapleton, sir, has smothered it in flour. But she has sent Joe off to a druggist's for some stuff as she wrote down on a paper."

"Miss Stapleton, eh?" and he smiled. "Ah, well, keep it covered up. I'll look at it by-and-bye."

He saw his patient, gave his instructions as usual to Hesba, but, instead of taking his hat, began,

"So, young lady, you are for practising the healing art without a diploma; going to take my profession out of my fingers. Dressing scalded hands and writing prescriptions! What is the world coming to?"

"What would Ann's hand have come to, if I had not, doctor?" replied Hesba, with a smile, pretty well used to the twinkle in the doctor's eyes by this time.

"That I will tell when I have seen it," he answered; "but what of this wonderful prescription? 'Stuff,' I think Ann called it."

"Oh, it is only linseed-oil and lime-water."

"Only! And pray where did you learn the efficacy of linseed-oil and lime-water?"

Hesba's clear grey eyes met his with as much surprise as if he had asked where she had learned her alphabet.

"Grandma Stapleton always used it."

"Always? Were scalds and burns so common in your household?"

"Oh, dear, no! But there were the poor people she visited."

"Ah, a sort of Lady Bountiful! And what else might she prescribe?"

"I was too young to remember, sir. I know there was *Ipecacuanha wine*, and *grey powder*, and *jalap*, and——" she paused, then went on archly, "and I *have* heard her prescribe soap-and-water, an open window, and a white-wash brush!"

"Capital! And suppose the poor people had got neither soap nor white-wash brush?"

"Then she would send them, and some lime as well."

"Better still! And suppose she kills somebody with her nostrums?"

"They are not nostrums, she called them 'simples,' and she will not kill anyone. Grandpa taught her, and she has all his books to consult. I wish *I* had them."

"Do you? Ah! now I remember—*you* have a wish to be a doctor; caught the infection from this physicking grandmother, I suppose. My dear, it is not a profession for a woman."

"Women are nurses, doctor, and in olden time, you know, the ladies were the leeches and the chemists too. I have heard my grandma say that in all old castles and mansions there was a still-room, where the lady used to make ointments and decoctions from all sorts of plants and herbs, and distilled strong waters; and when their knights were wounded in battle or tournament they were expected to dress their wounds and heal them, as surely as to physic their children and handmaids."

"All very well, Miss Stapleton; but those were rough times, before delicacy or nerves had been thought of."

"Rougher than those dreadful times out in the Crimea when Miss Nightingale and other ladies nursed the poor soldiers?"

"Upon my word, young lady, you improve. Perhaps you will say next that *you* would have nerve to amputate a crushed finger, or——"

"If necessary, and it would save the arm or the life," was her prompt interruption.

"Indeed! But do you think you would like a physician in petticoats to have charge of your mamma?" and he looked as if he thought the question a poser.

"Yes, Dr. Mitchell, I should, if she had skill to cure her. Oh! *I* would give everything I have in the world if I could only learn how to do *that*."

"No doubt, no doubt, my dear;" and the doctor hurried off,

just remembering, as he went, to say, "I think we may safely leave the scalded hand in your care, Miss Stapleton—at least, for the present."

"Singular girl, that, and sharp as a lancet. She must have got these notions from that queer grandmother of hers. It is clear she has heard the question of female physicians discussed. I expected her to throw that American woman, Mrs. Elizabeth Blackwell, in my face every moment. And I have no doubt the lass *would* have nerve to carry her through the whole course of medical training if she felt it was her vocation or her duty. As for study, she goes at it like a brick; takes to it much more kindly than I did when a lad. Latin was birched and caned into me. And she's a first-rate nurse too. I must have a little more talk with her, ascertain if she knows anything of botany or physiology—girls do dabble in sciences nowadays. Ah! perhaps I might put a scientific book into her hands, and see what she can make of it." So ran the tenor of Dr. Mitchell's rumination as his brougham bowled along to his next patient's.

He was as good as his intentions; found that she had some little knowledge and a thirst for more, and soon Hesba had the means for study placed within her reach, and she made the most of them; her craving for medical knowledge growing with what it fed on. And it was with her no new desire. Had she not practised the healing art on her dolls in the nursery? Had she not made herself acquainted with the nomenclature and appearance of the medicaments in the drawers and bottles in Mr. Forsyth's surgery, by dint of questioning and survey? Had not the "Penny Magazine" and "Culpepper's Herbal," taught her something of their nature and properties? It was not quite a novice Dr. Mitchell took in hand.

But time and opportunity did not come with the books. As the weeks and months flew by, so did her tasks and duties multiply. The servants were efficient, but an interpreter was required between the head of the house and the kitchen. Hesba had to act as that interpreter, to take the responsibility of management from her mother without abrogating her authority.

Ere long, Mrs. Mason became unable to quit her chamber every day, and Mr. Mason enlivened his dull evenings by occasional little dinner and whist parties, when everything was expected to be faultless; and Hesba was held accountable. On such occasions he gave his own orders to poulterers, fishmongers,

fruiterers, and was lavish in all that suggested refined hospitality or tended to personal enjoyment; but below that lay a system of narrow economics, and Hesba was required to keep not only a check on general expenditure, but to balance her weekly accounts to the last farthing.

There was family and household sewing to be done more than she had leisure for. He met Hesba's wish to employ a needlewoman with the reply,

"I can have no hired seamstress coming and going about this place to carry tittle-tattle. If there be more sewing than you can accomplish, you must set Mercy to work; it is quite time she learned the use of her needle. She cannot expect to be kept in idleness all her days; and she will have to support herself by-and-bye." He said this one morning over the breakfast-table for ten-year-old Mercy to hear and take to heart.

And the little heart swelled until there was no more room for breakfast. It was not his first reminder of her dependence.

"Idleness!" Was there a more untiring foot in the whole household? Was she not ready to do everyone's bidding for only a kind word? Was she not as ready to shell peas in the kitchen for the cook as to keep Mr. Mason's *bric-à-brac* free from dust in the drawing-room? Was she ever late at school or backward with her lessons? Did she not enter the sickroom like a veritable "sunbeam," bringing the brightest and sweetest of flowers, the brightest and sweetest of smiles? And did she not cheer the sick heart with rainbow-tinted visions of Brian's glad return? Who but she knew how his photograph was guarded and treasured?

She must "learn to use her needle!" She had learned that long ago by Grandma Stapleton's side; she had already helped Hesba all that little fingers could, for she had no toys now, no playmate since Brian had gone, and there was neither dog, cat, nor bird in the house. No living thing for a child to pet or play with. Mr. Mason had no liking for domestic animals.

Hesba sent her off to school that morning with an extra kiss and a caress, told her "not to mind, perhaps Ann would help her;" meaning to rise an hour earlier herself. And it was only by rising early, before even the servants were astir; that Hesba could find time for study. Music was passing from her from want of practice; she let that go without a sigh; but her thirst for knowledge she *must* satisfy, and she did it in those

early morning hours, making a progress which astonished Dr. Mitchell.

Not even to himself had Mr. Mason admitted his full intent when he "packed Brian off to sea." He proposed to "get rid of him," and he had done so, at least for five years, scarcely conscious that he imagined "nautical training" quite a sufficient sponge to wipe out the memory of unestablished legal claims.

Got rid of him! Never was he more mistaken. Brian sat by his hearth and at his board attired as Hesba, looked out of her blue-grey eyes at him; and in the very music of her voice were the brother's notes and tones.

That was a living form moving about from room to room—Brian's feminine twin. But there seemed a ghostly, intangible Brian always rising up between himself and his wife. After the portraits passed into her possession, and she had said a faint "thank you," she never uttered her son's name to him. But her silence said more than speech, and in every sigh he seemed to hear the name of Brian; and, though no audible reproaches fell from her lips, the increasing pallor of her cheeks was as effectual.

From the day Brian had been taken off little Mercy shrank from him as if he had been a leper, and, though he set no value on the child, her avoidance stung him—stung him not one whit the less from her own insignificance.

He had marked her out from the first as a something only to be tolerated to oblige his wife; had dressed his stepchildren with due regard to his own position and respectability—the foundling according to his notions of her inferiority. Yet when the distinction in dress, coupled with her rare beauty, attracted attention, he did not fail to make capital of the "poor waif, kept by my wife out of compassion," and was not at all particular that the "poor waif" should be out of hearing.

Latterly she had ceased to be marked out for the scorn of her schoolfellows by her attire, for Mrs. Stapleton had put Mercy's wardrobe on a par with Hesba's, and taken payment in kisses from both. She was none the less a foundling, fed and clothed by charity, and, as such, a thing to be ignored as beneath him. How was it that he felt as if the child, in holding aloof, put him on a lower level? Had he done something so mean and base that even she had a right to despise him?

Home was not the more pleasant for these shadowings forth of Conscience. He did not like her face. He decided that a companion would drive away unwelcome images. He announced to Hesba one morning in April that Brian's room must be put in order for his nephew, who would henceforth make one of the family.

To Hesba and Mercy this giving up of Brian's chamber to another was little less than desecration, and the dismantling—the removal to their own apartment of his books and other belongings—was a very sorrowful task, none the less that Theobald Capper (the clerk we have seen in the shipbroker's office) was built too closely on his uncle's model to be a favourite.

That night when Mr. Mason drove up to the gate in a cab with his nephew and his nephew's luggage, he found Joe stationed there on the watch, to ensure quiet; and Mercy, with the front-door ajar, almost choking with stifled sobs.

Hesba and Dr. Mitchell both were with Mrs. Mason, and she was in a perilous condition.

Up the stairs went Mr. Mason, leaving Joe and his nephew with an injunction to "take the luggage in at the back, and make no noise."

Very softly he turned the handle of the door where his wife lay, but his boots creaked, and the doctor waved him back; either the sound or the footstep seemed to distress the patient, and set the feeble pulse off at a gallop.

Dr. Mitchell went out to him.

"What does this mean? I left Mrs. Mason in her normal condition this morning," was asked.

"Some excitement respecting the apartment a young relative of yours is about to occupy, so far as I can learn," was the answer.

"Preposterous!" ejaculated Mr. Mason, pacing the floor.

"May be so," assented the doctor, "but seeing that Mrs. Mason is so very sensitive with respect to her son's room, might it not be as well if a change was effected more in consonance with the lady's feelings?"

"It is not my practice to change my plans, Dr. Mitchell; and I certainly shall not do so for a mere woman's whim. A good room is lying idle, and I have found a use for it. Any objection is to my mind absurd."

Mr. Mason had by this time taken a seat just within the

drawing-room, and was looking up at the doctor with his finger-tips pressed together.

"Yet your wife has taken it much to heart, and she is very ill, sir."

"Oh, she will get over it."

"I'm afraid not, sir."

"She will have to do!" He evidently misunderstood the doctor's meaning.

At that moment Joe and Theobald Capper, in their stocking-feet, were between them carrying a heavy box up the higher flight of stairs, Joe leading.

Midway, the handle broke off in Joe's hand, and the great box went down with a crash that shook the whole floor.

There was a faint cry from the sick-room, and Dr. Mitchell was across the landing in an instant.

It was little use for Mr. Mason to linger on the landing and blame the carriers for carelessness, or to tell them the luggage might have remained below; the mischief was done.

Mrs. Mason had been worse than her husband had apprehended. She could not rally from the shock, was speechless when he followed the doctor to her bedside, and she never spoke more. Mercy crept in on tiptoe just as the beatific light of heaven irradiated the wan face, and she felt as if the smile was for her. Hesba, close to the bedside, watching every change of countenance, felt the beloved hand clasp hers convulsively, and held her breath, but never stirred or shed a tear until all was over.

What was felt by the white-faced man at the foot of the bed can never be known. He stood there like a statue, stunned, immovable. In his heart of hearts he had suspected a good deal of sentimental affectation in his wife's ill-health; had regarded medical hints as "mere professional clap-trap," and dealt with her according to his own sufficiency.

Before him lay the result.

Lead the two bereaved orphans away softly, Dr. Mitchell, that they may weep their anguish out elsewhere in each other's arms; and leave Robert Mason there alone with his dead, and ask not whether grief, or remorse, or the sudden shock, or all three combined, have struck him thus dumb as a stone.

He will summon Mrs. Stapleton to the funeral, will give the remains of Frances Mason ostentatious burial, will record her

virtues and his widowed affection on an elaborate tablet, clothe family and servants in expensive mourning, but he will never be able to hold his head up again in Liverpool as a gentleman without spot or blemish, for rumour has got another feather to its wing, and the coat of his respectability is falling to tatters.

CHAPTER XIV.

THEOBALD CAPPER.

Joe had been censured unduly for what was none of his fault.

Theobald Capper, who, like his uncle, had a will of his own, had insisted on having his luggage carried to his room straightway, the only concession he would make to Joe's care for his mistress being the removal of his boots.

The colloquy between Dr. Mitchell and Mr. Mason took place just within the open doorway of the drawing-room.

The box-bearers coming slowly up the stairs, and turning cautiously on the landing with their heavy load between them, heard all that passed.

Mr. Mason paid his domestics with coin of the realm; Mrs. Mason had supplemented this with consideration and kindness. She held a place in their hearts where he could never enter. Joe was devoted to his mistress much as he had been devoted to Brian. It cut him to the soul to be told by the master that his "carelessness had caused her sudden death," he "had no business to trust a heavy weight to an insecure handle."

And so it came about that Joe, in self-justification, maintained that "master was a good deal more to blame," adding his peculiar version of the brief colloquy he had overheard, and airing his grievance not only before his fellow-servants, but the page at one villa, the housemaid at another, the groom at a third, the butcher's boy, the grocer's boy, the very undertaker's men. Was it to be wondered if, by regular gradations, the story set afloat passed upwards into drawing-rooms, outwards into offices and counting-houses, until meeting that other half-asleep rumour of Brian's compulsory shipment, and the previous private arrangement with Captain Mawson, should waken it up and go fluttering about until at last it fluttered into Septimus Crowe's musty office, to be captured and carried straightway to his patron?

It had been a puzzle to Mr. Mason why men who had been wont to greet him on 'Change with a shake of the hand, or a

pleasant "good day," had of late passed him by with a mere nod, if not wholly cut him; how it came about that underwriters seemed less eager to put their names beneath policies of insurance for ships on his list than had been their wont.

And when his little friend Septimus Crowe let him see how the grubs of those two moths, Rumour and Gossip, had fretted the superfine broadcloth of his character, there need be no surprise if he set his teeth and resolved to be even with the propagators, nothing doubting that Mrs. Stapleton and Dr. Forsyth were the mischief-makers.

At the same time it nipped in the bud a project of his for ridding himself of an incumbrance, and induced him to recall instructions previously given to Mr. Crowe, to "obtain admission for Stapleton's pick-up into the new 'Female Orphan Asylum' by hook or by crook."

"Had you not better wait awhile," that worthy suggested, "until the ill-feeling subsides? It would never do to run counter to popular prejudice just at present; and if it got wind that you had sent to a charitable institution an orphan Captain Stapleton had preserved and fostered, whilst the old woman over at Woodside was willing to take her back, there *might* be some fresh odium arising from the transaction; people are always so remarkably conscientious in matters which don't concern them."

"Ah, well, perhaps you are right," assented Mr. Mason with ill grace. "I had made up my mind to have her out of the way before that boy comes back; but I have no desire to play into the hands of that fellow Forsyth, or Mrs. Stapleton either, so we will wait."

The more convenient season for which he waited came not. Robert Mason had to give all his attention to his declining business; and though he scowled at Mercy, she still kept her place in his abode, and if she held aloof from him, she lightened the labour and shared the sorrows of Hesba, and served to keep in check the somewhat obtrusive familiarity of Theobald Capper towards her foster-sister.

That young gentleman had from the first assumed an air of patronising elder-brotherliness towards Hesba, and was even at times officiously attentive, but Hesba was scarcely prepared to receive him as a substitute for the dear brother he had supplanted, and Mercy regarded him with decided disfavour.

All their hopes, and prayers, and longings were for the brother

Brian out at sea; they counted the weeks and days since he had been torn from them, and mingled with their desire for his return was their painful knowledge of the shock awaiting him, and their anxiety how the sorrowful news would be broken to him; even though they had Mr. Forsyth's promise to be the first to meet him on deck, and to break it gently.

Mercy's midsummer holidays were half over when the *Dolphin* came into port. The first landsman's foot upon her deck was that of Robert Mason.

Brian—no longer taut and trim, but brown, barefooted, barebreasted, tarry, with almost a year's growth in stature, and more than three years' growth in feature and experience—was coiling a cable into rings as a seaman hauled it in, when he caught sight of his stepfather shaking hands with Captain Lever.

As his eyes rested on two black studs against a background of white shirtfront, and travelled upwards to the broad black band upon his hat, every pulse in Brian's body seemed to stand still with a terrible foreboding.

A sharp anathema from the sailor recalled him to his duty; but his hands moved mechanically, his gaze still rivetted on that cloth-covered hat. As the last coil fell into its place, the sharp, clear voice of the captain sang out, "Stapleton, follow your father below."

Masts, rigging, all seemed to swim before Brian's eyes; he was almost too dizzy to keep his foothold on the ladder as he descended, so sickening was the apprehension of calamity. His white face and his gasping inquiry, "My mother?" cleared the way for Mr. Mason.

More kindly than ever before, he took his stepson's hand, and his own voice broke as he said, "You must be brave, Brian, to meet a great sorrow. Your mother is with the angels." And then, as the young sailor sank down on a seat, with his head on the cabin table, bursting with irrepressible anguish, he sat down beside him, and with more tenderness and delicacy than might have been expected from the cold, hard man, offered such consolation as he had to give. Then, after adding that his sisters were well, and that Captain Lever had granted leave for him to go ashore at once, with unusual delicacy he left the heartbroken youth to the sacredness of his deep sorrow, his own eyes brimming. Robert Mason's early love for Fanny Bayliss might not have been all a myth; and though disappointment and

love of gain had hardened his nature and grown upon him year by year, her unexpected death must have had a softening influence, and aroused his better feelings for her doubly-orphaned son.

A fee to a dock clerk had secured early intelligence to Dr. Forsyth; but when he and Willie—now a fine young fellow of eighteen, studying medicine under his father—stood among the bags and bales on the deck of the *Dolphin*, it was only to discover that Brian Stapleton had left the vessel with his step-father on leave until a fresh cargo was shipped.

Mr. Mason, not caring either to walk through the streets of Liverpool with his stepson in such a plight, or to witness the meeting with Hesba (of Mercy he had no thought), called a cab, drove to Lime Street, and, professedly as an act of courteous consideration, permitted Brian to take the train home alone.

It was well he left them to rush into each other's arms, and cling together and shed their sorrowing tears free from restraint, so different was this meeting from all they had anticipated. There was such a clashing of joy and sorrow; and Brian's grief was new.

The story of the mother's death was told amid rising tears, as the young sailor sat beside Hesba on a couch, and Mercy stood on the other side with her arm around his neck, his arms enfolding both. Naturally, Theobald Capper was mentioned, and his possession of Brian's room; but the great loss he had sustained swallowed up minor matters, and he made light of it, saying, "Never mind, Hesba; I have learned to sleep as soundly on a bare plank as on a feather bed. Mr. Capper and I will not quarrel over that if he behaves well to you."

Hesba had no complaints to make of Theobald Capper; he was "extremely polite."

"*I* think he is a great deal too polite," cried Mercy; "he wants her to play chess, and the piano, and to listen to him reading when she wants to study the books Dr. Mitchell lends her; and he doesn't like me to walk beside them when we go to church. I think him very disagreeable. He is not a bit like you, Brian."

"I am afraid you are prejudiced, Mercy," he said, with a smile on his bright face, shaking his wavy light-brown hair back from his forehead.

"Ah, Brian," said Hesba, his smile reflected in her own face,

"Mercy thinks there is no one to equal brother Brian, and I am sure I share her belief."

"I am glad to hear it; but some of these days you may both change your opinion," was his response.

"*I* shan't!" asserted Mercy, stoutly; Hesba merely shaking her head.

Brian made few complaints of hardship; although he might have done with reason. "What's the use of telling them?" he argued within himself; "I shall not make my own lot easier, and only set them fretting whilst I'm afloat, if I do."

He had inquiries to make about old friends, Grandma Stapleton, and the Forsyths. The girls were eager to know something of his sea life, and so many questions had to be asked and answered on both sides that the home-coming of Mr. Mason and his younger duplicate, Mr. Capper, took them by surprise.

"Dressing for dinner," ordinarily imperative, was, "under the circumstances," overlooked, and Brian wondered at the unwonted condescension. He had expected to be told that he must dine in the schoolroom as of old.

Moreover, no apparent restraint was put on Brian during his ten days' leave. The young sailor was supplied with a trifle of pocket-money, and rigged out afresh with a shore suit, as well as a sailing one.

Theobald Capper, however, stuck pretty closely to him, evidently meaning to be especially agreeable, and it was with some difficulty Brian shook him off even when he was going to Woodside.

Many changes had taken place in the old spot; but, with the exception that her hair was now perfectly white, Brian found no change in dear Grandma Stapleton. Her smile was as sweet, her voice as cheerful, she clasped him in as close an embrace as of old, and was as anxious for both his spiritual and bodily welfare as she had ever been, she who knew so well what were the dangers and temptations of a sea-boy's life both afloat and ashore.

A message brought Willie up the privet-hedged avenue at a run to greet his old playmate, and Mr. Forsyth followed in about an hour. Here Brian had less scruple in telling how he had been knocked and kicked about, how an order was enforced with an oath and a blow, and Captain Lever did nothing to prevent it; and it was with a shudder he declared his resolve to do his

duty without flinching so long as he was bound, but certainly to quit the service as soon as ever his apprenticeship was out. And then he asked if his father's will had been found. A shake of his grandma's white head was the reply.

"Aweel, my lad, they canna hold ye a day after ye're twenty-one. An' then, whether the lost will turns up or no, we'll rip open Robert Mason's pouch, let him button it up tight as he may. An' if I'm no above ground, here's Willie to stand by ye," and James Forsyth's hand went down on his son's shoulder as he spoke.

"And, Brian," added grandma, "as I have already told Hesba, there is a little property for her when she comes of age. I have kept that out of wrong fingers. I wish I could say the same for poor Mercy's railway shares, since her parents do not seem likely to turn up, and the dear child will have no one——"

"Don't have any fears for Mercy, grandma," interrupted Brian. "She belongs to me; I mean to take care of her. And who knows, now I am knocking about the world, I may not some day come across her owners? They were not drowned, that is certain."

"How do you know that?" asked the elders, simultaneously.

"Well, I overheard a sailor in Lima spinning a yarn to his mate about a terrific gale in the Bay of Biscay, when the steamer he was aboard nearly ran down a sailing vessel, and an officer's child was blown clean out of its mother's arms into the sea. You may be sure I pricked up my ears; but no sooner did I begin to show an interest in his story and asked the names of the steamer and the officer, than the fellow pitched into me, told me to mind my own business, and knocked me over. When I picked myself up the two were gone. I'd a notion he was a runaway, afraid of being hauled over the coals. At all events, it seemed pretty clear that the steamer did not go to the bottom, and Mercy may not be an orphan after all. I intend to keep a sharp look-out for that fellow; he may turn up again some day."

Brian had not related all this without interruptions and questionings. After some conversation, Mrs. Stapleton said, "I hope you have not told the poor child; it would only unsettle her. Dinah did mischief enough; and as you say Mr. Mason is more considerate and kind since your poor mother died, there is less reason to fill Mercy's mind with delusive expectations."

Here James Forsyth broke in: "Robert Mason kind and considerate! Then he's brewin' mischief in that lang head of his, tak' my word for it!" and the snuff-box emphasized the remark.

In the course of the evening, after the others were gone, Brian observed, "I fancy, grandma, you must be very lonely here now; would it not be better for Hesba and Mercy to come back and live with you? I am sure the girls would be more comfortable than in that fine house."

"Yes, my dear, I think they would, and I proposed it; but Mr. Mason said 'people would think he had turned his step-children out.' My private notion is"—and here the old lady tapped the palm of her left hand with her folded spectacles as a sort of emphasis—"that Fanny herself had exacted a promise from him to take care of you all when she was no more; and Hesba certainly met my proposal with her mother's hope that they might not be cast as a burden upon me and my limited income. As if I should think them a burden!" she went on. "We should only have to economise; and Hesba has to do that where she is, except on gala days."

Brian remained the night and took Willie Forsyth back with him to Edge Hill in the morning. What a surprise it was to Hesba and Mercy to see the fine young fellow, with just a faint line of tawny moustache on his upper lip, presented to them as their old friend Willie, whom they had not seen since he was a jacketed schoolboy!

On his part, he was equally struck. Mercy, always small and slender, had shot up wonderfully in the three years, losing nothing of her early loveliness; but he could scarcely realise that the self-possessed womanly figure before him, with the broad, intellectual forehead and clear grey eyes, was the Hesba who had sat on the same chair with him to learn the same lessons. His own growth had been gradual; her development something undreamed of—a something that rose like a barrier against old familiarity, whilst its attraction was threefold.

Willie Forsyth went back to Woodside with her musical voice in his ears, her image like a picture before him—a perception of some change within himself.

I almost think that it was on a hint of his that Mrs. Stapleton penned a note to Mr. Mason, desiring permission for her grand-

children and Mercy to spend a day with her before Brian sailed; and his nephew being included in the invitation, permission was, after some hesitation, accorded.

It was a day of unmitigated delight to Mercy and Hesba, notwithstanding the presence of Theobald Capper. The sun shone, the river sparkled in his beams, summer perfumes were in the air, summer flowers in wayside gardens—all nature seemed keeping holiday with them. Somehow they thought the cottage had shrunk and darkened since they left, but it was delightfully cosy and dear. There was a flying visit paid to Mrs. Forsyth and her children, now grown out of recollection, and to an old schoolfellow or two; and in the early afternoon Willie Forsyth presented himself, evidently got up for the occasion, and with him came his sister Effie, who paired off with Mercy.

Medical students are supposed to have over-mastered blushes, but Willie's colour undoubtedly rose as he shook hands with "Miss Stapleton" and "hoped she was well," the easy familiarity of boyhood gone like a dream. Another change, that was not a blush, came over his countenance when he was introduced to Mr. Mason's nephew, Mr. Theobald Capper, and the two looked direct into each other's eyes, bowed, but did *not* clasp hands.

They were courteous, but not cordial, and so they continued during the afternoon, keeping pretty much aloof, but watching each other, and watching Hesba, as if equally anxious to ascertain the other's place in her regard, her utter unconsciousness causing fluctuations in the mental thermometer not to be registered.

To Hesba the renewal of old associations was especially pleasing, and if she chatted overmuch with Willie, it was simply because they had old associations, and many themes in common besides—thanks to good Dr. Mitchell.

With these, however, Mr. Capper had no sympathy; twilight shadows gathered on his brow faster than those of the evening. It was he who consulted his watch and said it was time to depart. But it was Willie who gathered a sprig or two of mignonette and one of early jasmine for Hesba to bear away as a memorial of her old home, and of the "happiest afternoon of his life."

Mercy—ever a lover of the beautiful—carried away a

handful of such memorials, which Brian had plucked her at request.

Hesba turned, as she was going, to say, "I wish, grandma, you would lend me some of grandpa's books from the bookcase. I am so anxious to study medicine thoroughly."

"Well, my dear, I will think about it when you come again."

Come again! They would never come again.

CHAPTER XV.

MR. MASON'S "STOPPER."

If, as Mr. Forsyth opined, "Robert Mason was brewing mischief," the process was a somewhat slow one. All went on much as usual at the villa after Brian was gone, save that Hesba had more leisure for study, and that Grandma Stapleton found her way thither every three or four weeks, as if to satisfy herself that all was well with the two girls, deprived as they were of motherly counsel and support; and not even Mr. Mason could object openly to her visits. He could, and did, object to her companion, Mr. Willie Forsyth, he having volunteered to pilot her through the intricacies of the way—steamer, omnibus, trains, and so forth—whenever she felt equal to the journey.

Having become acquainted with Hesba's desire and proclivities, Willie suddenly found himself interested in the new question of female medical education, the training of women for the medical care of women, and, in the face of Mrs. Stapleton's successful gratuitous practice, could scarcely pronounce himself an adversary. He had been struck at first with Hesba's self-possession, her decision, her freedom from the affectations and frivolities of his ordinary feminine acquaintance, and I am afraid it was more to ingratiate himself with her that he raked up for her newspaper paragraphs, pamphlets, and reports (both English and American) bearing on the subject, than to declare his own adhesion to the movement.

Yet, in so doing he gave form to that which was but an inchoate desire—a crude perception of the fitness of things—a longing to be useful to her own sex, which had grown upon her at her mother's bedside, out of her very impotence to discern or to save; and her studies thenceforth had a more definite purpose.

Pleasurable to all four were these occasional visits, serviceable also to Hesba and Mercy in many ways; but they were not of very long continuance.

Having a firm conviction that Dr. Forsyth and Mrs. Stapleton were at the bottom of the slanderous reports which had under-

mined his business, and having by some means overheard the old lady's admission to Hesba that she had kept the girl's portion from falling into his hands, he had no mind that Willie Forsyth should come between that same "Birkenhead property" and his own nephew, for whom he designed it. And Theobald Capper had no mind that either he or any other fellow should come between himself and Hesba, fortune or no fortune. He had quite made up his mind that she would be an acquisition to any man who had patience to wait for her, and frequent consultation with his looking-glass had impressed him with the belief that the handsome face he saw there was not likely to wait in vain.

Having occasion to carry his office books home one afternoon in October to elaborate some complicated accounts for his uncle's investigation in the evening, he chanced to find Mrs. Stapleton examining Mercy's first specimens of water-colour drawing at the front window of the morning-room, and Willie Forsyth at the side one with Hesba, apparently engrossed in the consideration of two pamphlets she held in her hand; and he overheard the words, "Ladies' Medical College, Fitzroy Square," before his presence was known. This absorption of the two in a subject of mutual interest aroused him to the consciousness that old associations and kindred pursuits—to say nothing of good personal appearance—were heavy weights to throw into the scale against himself.

He bit his lip—there was a momentary contraction of his brow; but he bowed with polite if distant courtesy as he apologised for intrusion, and, books in hand, retired—a hint the visitors were not slow to take.

He was not so reticent with his uncle, who, in answer to his expressed opinion, "It is time these visits were put a stop to," replied quietly, "Don't be in a hurry, Theo. Winter will put a stop to the old lady's gallivanting, and her gay cavalier will scarcely have the audacity to enter my house alone. It would be a mistake to oppose his visits openly. I shall put an effectual stopper on in my own good time."

Before that time came Brian had made a second voyage on the *Dolphin's* back; but there was no ten-days' holiday for him while the brig lay in dock. A couple of days, between the unloading and re-loading, were all he could obtain, and he had to make the most of them. He had brought back with him a few mementoes

from South American parts, and, what was more, a fund of affection, an unspoiled heart, and the assurance that he treasured the memorials he had carried away with him, Mercy's thread-case, the locket, and his mother's Bible, and the letter which was a safeguard to him in many a snare.

But he had not conquered his repugnance for the sea, and his experience was not of a kind to create liking; there was a surly, ill-conditioned mate on board the *Dolphin* who made his life intolerable, he said.

"It would have been worse," said his grandma, "if you had sailed with Captain Mawson in the *Regia*, as was first intended."

"Captain Mawson! The *Regia!*" Brian exclaimed. "Why, it was the *Regia*, Captain Mawson, we found in the Gulf Stream adrift and burning; we picked up one of the crew afloat on a hen-coop the next morning." And then Brian repeated the man's story of ill-usage, mutiny, murder, the firing and abandonment of the barque, and the escape of the mutineers in one of the boats.

Very white went the old lady during the recital, and at its close she made her grandson for the first time aware of his own narrow escape from the *Regia* and Captain Mawson as a reason for devout thankfulness and patient endurance of the lesser hardships which had fallen to his lot; a quiet lesson the young man never lost sight of.

Brian had scarcely sailed a month, with a long trading voyage before him, when, on the last Thursday in September, Dr. Forsyth (who had forgotten his shrewd summing-up of the black-browed shipbroker's kindness the previous year), walking briskly up Castle Street, noticed a man with a mahl-stick and palette in one hand, a brush in the other, painting a fresh name in the place of "Robert Mason" on the door-post.

Into the office he went. There were only strange faces. For information he was referred to Mr. Crowe.

Mr. Crowe was not over-communicative. His client had disposed of his business, and left Liverpool.

"Has he left no address?"

Mr. Crowe was sorry, but he had no authority to give a client's address.

Hurrying over his own business, the surgeon took the next train to Edge Hill. The venetians were drawn down at the handsome villa, there was straw on the lawn, and a board inscribed "To Let" referred would-be tenants to the house-agent.

A cab whirled him to the house-agent. "Mr. Mason left on the expiration of his lease."

From the agent to Dr. Mitchell.

"My dear sir," said the latter, "I know little more than yourself. Miss Stapleton came here on Tuesday afternoon, almost out of breath, to return a couple of books I had lent. She was in much distress at the probable break-up of her studies, having been ordered to pack up her own personalities and those of her foster-sister for removal, reserving for separate package a supply of garments for immediate use. She told me that Mr. Theobald Capper and two men had been packing pictures, glass and china all the morning, and that the maids—as much in the dark as herself—hinted that 'so much packing implied a far-off flitting.' I saw her fine eyes set as if a sudden light had broken in upon them. 'Do you think we are being carried out of grandma's reach?' she asked. I pooh-poohed the idea, saying that a business man must live within a certain radius of his business. But if, as you tell me, he has given up brokerage, I am afraid I have misled the young lady."

"I'm afraid you have, doctor," was James Forsyth's grave reply. "Hesba would certainly have flown to her grandmother with Mercy had she suspected they were to be spirited awa' to a distance."

"She told me she had sent a hurried note to Mrs. Stapleton."

"When?"

"On Tuesday morning."

"It had no' reached her when I left home at noon, an' this is Thursday. I'd give muckle ta ken where the lassies are, for Mrs. Stapleton's sake. It will be a sair blow to her."

It was a blow to some one besides Mrs. Stapleton, some one who had not yet been disciplined to accept such separations as the dispensation of Providence.

Willie Forsyth, who had been building castles in the air, found them suddenly blown to the four winds; and in the reaction of his sanguine spirit pronounced himself the most unfortunate and wretched of mortals.

Nearly a fortnight went by before they had sign or token of the missing ones. Not that they were either passive or inactive. Willie Forsyth was seldom in his father's surgery whilst there was an office open in Liverpool where he could make an inquiry. In some of these places he was sure that information was with-

held, he was scanned so narrowly from head to foot, and answered so evasively. At Sparling and Grove's, in Water Street, the senior partner said coolly, "Oh, you will be the wild medical student we were led to expect! Well, my gay young spark, when wolves in sheep's clothing come prowling around the folds of our innocent lambs, it is time they were led to safer quarters. I have daughters of my own, sir; you will get no information here."

Natural indignation only resulted in an order to "Turn the young rake out," and Willie had much ado to keep his hot blood within bounds so as to avoid the further disgrace of an open broil.

In putting the fairest colour on his own departure, Mr. Mason had evidently contrived to blacken his imaginary maligners, and no doubt smiled serenely over the clever stroke.

The annoyance it caused our Woodside friends was excessive; and the excitement was at its height when an unpaid letter, bearing the London postmark, was handed in to Mrs. Stapleton. The old lady's trembling fingers scarcely could find the coppers to pay the postage, so eager was she to rip open the envelope. What she read ran thus, barring the frequent interjections of the reader:—

"Bloomsbury Square, London,
"Oct. 1st, 1870.

"My dear, dear Grandma,—I am afraid my hasty note would not prepare you for our sudden departure without a kiss or a word of leave-taking. I can judge by my own feelings what a shock you must have had if you went to Edge Hill on the Wednesday. Our removal came upon me quite suddenly. As I told you, I only knew on the Monday night, when I was ordered to pack up Mercy's things and my own. And then I had no idea we were removing to a distance.

"All Tuesday was hurry and confusion; two men packing glass and china with the help of Mr. Capper, who posted my note. ('Bless the child! it never came here. I'm afraid his pocket was the post-office,' interjected grandma.) I did manage to run to Dr. Mitchell's, to thank him for his great kindness, and restore two borrowed books; but I had no sooner got back than Mercy and I were hurried off in a cab to the station, with barely time to swallow a mouthful of food beforehand, and we were far on the road to London before I was

conscious we had turned our backs on Liverpool. It was no use remonstrating. Mr. Mason coolly told me that my mother had committed me to his guardianship, and that if I made a scene and appealed to any of the officials, I should only bring discredit on myself to no purpose. He evidently thinks to ride the high hand with me as with poor mamma, but I have my father's spirit, and do not mean to be crushed. ('I hope not,' quoth grandma, whose interjections continued throughout the reading of the letter.)

"At a great bustling station, called Crewe, he left us for a few minutes to procure some refreshments; and no sooner was his back turned than Mercy suggested that we should run away. And really, if I had had money to carry us back to Liverpool, I think I should have slipped away with her. But I have never had one shilling of pocket-money since mamma died, and he knew it. ('Dear me! I never suspected such meanness; I'll soon remedy that!')

"I was hesitating what course to pursue, when a well-known voice struck my ear, saying, 'This way, my lady.' As I looked out, an elegantly-dressed woman walked past quickly, speaking as she went. She was answered in the voice I knew, "I have them quite safe, my lady," and then I saw clearly that the little figure in attendance on the lady was no other than Dinah Smart! ('Goodness! I wish I had been there.')

"I called 'Dinah!' tried to open the carriage door, but the handle was stiff; and before I was down on the platform Dinah and her mistress were lost in the crowd. Mr. Mason came up with wine and buns, and ordered me to my seat in his hard way; but you may be sure I did not tell *him* I had seen Dinah. ('I should think not!')

"Both Mercy and I were half asleep when the train stopped at Euston, for it was late, and we were weary. Standing together and waiting whilst Mr. Mason looked after our luggage, my eyes confused by the long rows of lamps, the shifting line of cabs, the rush of passengers and porters, I heard an authoritative call for Major Somebody's carriage, saw a liveried footman busy and important with somebody's luggage, and in less than two minutes the carriage was driving away with Dinah Smart and the footman perched up at the back! ('Dear me! The little thief must have travelled in the same train. I wonder who her lady is.')

"We have a fine suite of rooms, and we are well waited on, but neither Mercy nor myself can stir out without my stepfather or that horrid Mr. Capper. They have certainly been attentive, and taken us already to the National Gallery and the British Museum, which is close at hand—a very wonder of wonders—and Mercy has been in ecstasies. But I know I shall have to watch my chance to post this. I do not like to give an unstamped letter to a servant, and faith in those who brought us hither so treacherously is impossible."

The letter, dated a week earlier, was filled with those messages and affectionate outpourings so interesting to recipients, so vapid to others. But no sooner was Mrs. Stapleton possessed of its contents than, under shelter of an umbrella and a waterproof, she braved a soaking shower to communicate her knowledge to her true friends the Forsyths.

CHAPTER XVI.

A LOST OPPORTUNITY.

HESBA's letter created no small stir. There was an intense feeling of thankfulness that the silence was broken and the whereabouts of the girls known, but that was considerably modified by the circumstances attending their removal, and the long miles placed between them as barriers against free intercourse.

Hesba's recognition of Dinah Smart, first at Crewe and later at Euston, set conjecture afoot and threw open the gates of discussion. And as the kind old lady read of Hesba's inability to send her letter to post for lack of a stamp, or a penny to buy one, she broke down, and, in a choking voice, said, "I never expected a grandchild of mine would come to such a pass! I would have taken care they had pocket-money if I had only known they were kept without. It was poor dear Fanny's fault that I did not know. If she had not talked to the girl of my narrow income, Hesba would not have been too delicate to tell me. Nay, I might have had the girls safe under my own roof now. But if *that* heart-ache's past remedy, pocket-ache is not. I'll see she is not short of a postage stamp. I suppose she would have had no paper either if the desk I gave her last birthday had not been well filled. I am glad I had the sense to stock Mercy with drawing materials at the same time, or the dear child's chief delight would be gone. And what sort of a place is this Bloomsbury Square the shabby fellow has taken my darlings to, I should like to know?"

"Mak' yer mind easy on that score, Mrs. Stapleton," quoth Mr. Forsyth, who had made sundry visits to London over the publication of his medical works. "Robert Mason mann aye have a big house an' fine furniture to show off; let him pinch and screw in the pockets an' pantries oot o' sight as he wull. They are a' tall braw hooses in Bloomsbury Square (torbye the kitchens are in th' cellars underground, and canna be healthy or light), an' there's a town gairden railed off in the centre o' the square, with a statue as black as ink keepin' guard ower its respectabeelity. An' it's no for savin he'll be keepin' the

lassies short, or he wad hae saved himsel' the cost o' their maintenance a'thegether, I'm thinking. He's no just minded to gie the lasses th' means o' rinnin awa, or writin' letters to their friends. An' if ye tak' my advice, ye winna send Hesba mair than a few stamps till ye're sairtain whose hands they'll fa' intil."

Grandma Stapleton shook her head, as if she fancied the canny Scot overcautious, but she thought otherwise when her epistle to Miss Stapleton, stamps and money-order included, came back to her through the dead letter office, marked "not known." It was another addition to her fund of perplexity.

Meanwhile Hesba and Mercy were equally anxious for news from Woodside, and when days multiplied themselves into weeks without bringing any other answer than "No, miss," to the daily inquiry, "Any letters for me?" the former grew especially uneasy.

It was Mercy who put an end to this state of things.

A few leaves clung persistently to the trees in the enclosure, but October had scarcely a gleam of sunshine left to show how grimy and dingy they were, for the month began to look awfully like November. Jemima, the maid who waited on them, was bringing in their luncheon tray. Just then the postman's sharp rat-tat drew Mercy to one of the windows of their first floor sitting-room, whence she could watch him make the circuit of the square. "Dear me!" she cried, as he passed the door, "it is very strange Grandma Stapleton does not write to us."

"Stapleton!" echoed the young woman, in surprise. "A letter did come for a Miss Stapleton two or three weeks ago, but we didn't take it in. That would not be for you, miss, would it?"

"Of course it would," answered Hesba, provoked at what she considered Jemima's stupidity. "For whom else could it be?"

"Well, miss," replied the maid, apologetically, "Mr. Mason said as if any letters came for his daughter they was to be given to him, so we thought, to be sure, your name must be Mason too. There was Mason on all your luggage, miss."

"Mr. Mason is only my stepfather," explained Hesba. "My name is Stapleton; and I shall expect to receive my own letters, thank you," added she, with quiet decision.

"I say, Hesba; do you think Jemima let it slip out on

purpose about Mr. Mason wanting your letters? She must have known our names," said Mercy, when the girl was gone.

"Perhaps not, my dear. He never speaks of us except as 'Miss Hesba,' or 'Miss Mercy,' or 'My daughters'; and Mr. Capper has taken the liberty also to call us by our Christian names since we came to London."

"And I saw that Mr. Mason's name *was* on all our luggage."

"Well, my dear, that does not matter now. I must hurry over luncheon, at the risk of indigestion, to get an explanation off to grandma by this afternoon's post."

Hesba had a rapid flow of words, and wrote a bold clear hand. As her pen flew over the paper she was unaware that Mercy, at the side table, was as busy with her pencil, until she folded her letter and began to address an envelope.

"You can put that inside for grandma. Tell her it is *my letter*."

"Well, Mercy, you have really made a capital likeness. Grandma will be as much pleased with your letter as with mine," and Hesba pressed a hasty kiss on the other's cheek.

Mercy's "letter" was just an impromptu portrait of Hesba at her desk, by no means wanting in spirit or ability.

"And what have you said to grandma?" was Mercy's inquiry, as they were hastening across the square to the District post-office in Holborn, close at hand.

"Oh, I have told her to send her letters to the post-office in future; that Mr. Mason and Mr. Capper go into the City every morning now, and that we think he has an office there; and that Mr. Capper let out that his uncle will look for a house in the spring, so there can be no intention of going back to Liverpool. And I told her of the pleasant hours we spent in the Museum, of the friendship you had struck up with Miss Agnew in the art students' gallery, and of my interview with the secretary of the Ladies' Medical College in Fitzroy Square. And I asked grandma if something could not be done with that bit of property at Birkenhead, so as to realise funds to give you an art education and me a medical one."

"Oh, Hesba! did you say that?" and Mercy clasped her hands together, well pleased.

The unstamped letter went into the box, the pair turned back, and Hesba resumed, "Yes, Mercy, I did. I know dear, unselfish grandma would find the means herself for anything to benefit

either of us; but I do not think she can afford to do it without making personal sacrifices neither you nor I would be willing to accept. And though I do not exactly feel dependent on Mr. Mason whilst he holds money that should be dear Brian's, he has a way of making our obligation palpable to others which rouses anything but a Christian spirit in my breast. And he opens his purse-strings so reluctantly when our wardrobes need replenishing, that I am not sure he will not close it altogether some day, and leave us both to shift for ourselves."

"I know he has been tired of keeping *me* for a very long while," interjected Mercy, with a desponding sigh.

"Well, Mercy, dear," and Hesba gave the younger one's hand a reassuring pressure as they took another turn round the square, "all we can do is to make ourselves independent of Mr. Mason as speedily as possible. You know what Miss Agnew thinks of your artistic talent. *She* calls it 'genius,' but that is a very delusive word. George Stephenson, the great self-taught railway engineer, said, 'Genius is nothing more than *Perseverance! Perseverance! Perseverance!*' and so, dear Mercy, if you apply his lever to your undeveloped talent, it may have all the force of genius; and as I have an undoubted vocation for physic, who knows but perseverance may find both of us bread and cheese, and postage stamps besides, whenever Mr. Mason gets tired of keeping us both and turns us out, or we get tired of him and turn ourselves out?"

"Turn ourselves out!" Mercy repeated; "that is not very likely!" and she laughed heartily, as if wonderfully tickled by the idea.

"I'm not so sure of that," responded Hesba, with a peculiar nod of her head. "If my chain galls me over-much, I think it more than probable I should break it." And, the lightness of her former speech gone, she seemed to tread the ground with a firmer foot as the words left her lips, and an unspoken thought flashed through her mind; for she had a far-seeing intelligence.

As Mercy had watched the postman at noon, now she watched the lamp-lighter hurrying on his rounds, and leaving jets of light behind him in the gathering dusk. Suddenly she cried,

"Oh, Hesba, here is Mr. Capper coming to meet us."

He advanced at a quick pace, and would have drawn Hesba's arm within his own familiarly, but she repelled him with a quiet

gesture, as if she said to herself, "His presumption is growing intolerable."

"You don't seem to thank me for coming, Hesba," he said.

"I like to have the free use of my limbs, Mr. Capper," she replied; "and an escort is not necessary within sight of our own door." They were almost on the steps as she spoke.

Then it transpired that Mr. Mason, home unusually early, had sent his nephew in quest of them. He treated the necessity as a grievance, and censured their impropriety in promenading a London square close upon nightfall; and, though there was less of fatherly kindness and teaching in his sarcasms than of baffled curiosity, Hesba never gave him a second such opportunity.

Full three days were allowed to intervene before Hesba and Mercy presented themselves at the post-office and asked if there was a letter for Miss Stapleton. A handsome man, somewhat past middle age, and of military bearing, seeing the two young ladies in mourning enter, courteously made way for them at the counter, and in so doing his eyes fell on the lovely face of Mercy, and seemed fixed as by a spell. Mercy reddened under his gaze and turned away.

"Miss Stapleton," said the clerk, laying a letter down. "One penny to pay."

Hesba had her hand on the coveted missive. It dropped. There came a mist before her eyes, a blank across her features. She had not calculated on this contingency; she had imagined her grandma's stamp would pass a letter free to her. She stood there confessedly without a penny.

The clerk grew impatient. "I did not know—I must go home for——" Hesba began, and was moving aside. The stranger took in the situation at a glance.

The clerk was withdrawing the letter. A voice, evidently accustomed to command, said, "Stay, sir; give the young lady her letter," and a penny dropped on the counter. "Permit me," said he, "to do you this slight service. I see you have forgotten your purse, and your correspondence may be too important to wait your return home."

Hesba's independence battled with her necessity. Her letter was important. She had no means to release it, yet she hesitated, loth to lay herself under obligation to a stranger. Mercy pulled her sleeve. "Take it, Hesba," she whispered. "Don't leave grandma's letter here. There may be money in it."

"Your telegram has gone, sir," said another clerk; but the gentleman still lingered, casting many a glance at Mercy, whose whisper he must have heard, for he said to the elder, "I think, young lady, you would be wise to take the advice of your sister—I presume she *is* your sister?" and he seemed to expect a reply.

By that time Hesba had the letter in her hand. Her thanks for his politeness ended with "Yes, sir; she is my sister," an answer which somehow had hardly been anticipated.

There were stamps and a post-office order in Hesba's envelope. She brightened. "Oh, sir," she said, "I can relieve myself of debt, if you will oblige me by accepting a stamp in lieu of a penny. Your kindness I can never hope to repay."

A motion of his hand rejected the offered stamp. "Your little sister has already repaid me with smiles," he said; then, observant of her face, continued, "Nay, if you are too proud to accept a favour from a stranger, old enough to be your father, give me Her Majesty's portrait, I shall keep it as a remembrance; though John Rutherford will need no reminder." He raised his hat to Hesba as he was going, but put out his hand to Mercy, saying, "Little miss, you are the image of the dearest friend I ever had, I shall not easily forget *you*."

And so he passed out and was gone; Hesba, who had already turned to the counter to present her order for payment, losing his speech to Mercy, who for her part was undecided whether to be more pleased with him for his timely service, or annoyed by his peculiar and recurring glances at herself. But neither had a suspicion what ghost-like memories haunted Major Rutherford as he took his way towards Oxford Street.

"Mercy," said Hesba, as they were on their way home, "did you catch that gentleman's name?"

"It was John something."

"Dear me," exclaimed Hesba, "I wish I had had my wits about me! It has just struck me it had the sound of the name called out at Euston for the carriage Dinah went off upon. What an opportunity I have lost for want of ordinary presence of mind!"

Ah! Hesba little thought what an opportunity she had lost, or *how* she had lost it.

But who amongst us has not to lament lost opportunities? Who amongst us has not lost opportunities unknown and consequently unlamented?

CHAPTER XVII.

DINAH'S NEW MISTRESS.

HESBA's ears had not deceived her. Had she and Mercy followed the stranger, who called himself John Rutherford, up New Oxford Street, instead of hurrying along Southampton Street to their lodgings across the square, they might have seen standing before Mudie's door the self-same carriage which had whirled Dinah away from Euston; and they might have seen the self-same liveried footman carrying a parcel of books to "my lady" in the carriage, and, after placing them with other parcels on the opposite seat, stand back with one hand holding the door and the other touching his forehead, whilst their military friend, marching up, gave a brief order, then joined the lady seated within. They might have seen the footman pass his orders to the coachman, then mount to the rumble; but they would have been no wiser, for there was no Dinah then on the seat, and the man's resplendent purple-and-gold was concealed under a sober overcoat which came to his heels.

Hesba would neither have recognised the man nor the vehicle; the gentleman would still have been merely the polite stranger to whom they were indebted for a very timely and courteous service, so it was as well they hurried straight home to devour grandma's communication.

We, however, are privileged to follow Major Rutherford to his seat beside his sister, Lady Dynevor, of Dynevor Manor, and to take notes of all it imports we should know.

He was a man above the middle height, erect, broad-chested, bronzed, rather than florid, with a very decided cast of countenance, across which the ploughshare of affliction had drawn its ineffaceable lines, his hair having the nondescript tinge of dark brown on which grey had intruded before its time.

Several years his elder was the lady, but not a thread of white was to be seen in the smooth bands above her brows, not a line on her well-kept face, if we except the faint crowfeet at the outer corners of her eyes; her cheek retained something of youth's freshness, something of youthful bloom, and her tall,

dignified figure had not lost its graceful curves. Perhaps Dinah knew the secret of her lady's wonderful preservation.

We may only add that her gloves and boots were small and faultless as the members they protected, and that her whole costume of dark olive was a triumph of fashionable art in dealing with inexpensive materials, and that suspended from her neck by a thin gold chain was a double eye-glass, which served many purposes besides the ostensible one.

"I have had a little adventure since I left you, Ernestine," said the major, as he took his seat.

"Ah! an adventure? An agreeable one, I hope," and the lady smiled, revealing a set of strong white teeth, which might have come from the dentist.

"Partly," was the sober rejoinder. "A young lady and her sister—she *said* she was her sister—both in deep mourning, entered the post-office just as I had given in my telegram, and asked for a letter for Miss Stapleton."

"Miss ——" The interruption which began as a startled exclamation dropped into a somewhat languid query. "I did not catch the name?"

"Stapleton," repeated the major, unobservant that Lady Dynevor had changed colour even beneath the artificial bloom. "The young lady did not seem aware that a charge was made for letters left until called for, and I saw she was overwhelmed with shame, having evidently left her purse behind. You may be sure I did not allow her to go back without her letter."

"Ah! just like my simple-minded brother! How do you know the girl was not an impostor?" and up went the lady's eye-glasses, as if to scan unfamiliar features.

"An impostor for *a penny?* Nay, Ernestine, that is an illiberal assumption. She was as much a lady as yourself. 'It was her grandma's letter,' said the younger sister."

"What younger one?" There was a sort of petulant quickness about the question so foreign to Lady Dynevor, it must have attracted her brother's attention had he been of a suspicious nature.

"That is the point, Ernestine! She was a most lovely girl. I should say thirteen years old—the very counterpart of poor Blanche! Her rich chestnut hair, her dimpled cheeks, her large brown loving eyes, her nose, her lips—there was scarcely a line memory could not trace. I could not keep my eyes away from

the child. I am sure she set me down as impertinent. For my part, I felt as if I could have clasped her in my arms and wept over her! It seemed as if something whispered me, 'The waves have given back your child. Blanche's babe was not lost—she is here!'"

"This is really too absurd," broke from Lady Dynevor, with a faint affectation of supreme indifference.

"You would not have said so, if you had seen the fair child as I saw her. Indeed, my dream was only partially dispelled when Miss Stapleton replied to my question, 'Yes, sir; she is my sister!' I was compelled to believe her; but if Blanche herself had risen from the dead, I could scarcely have had a greater shock;" and the bronzed soldier sighed as he drew his hand across his forehead wearily.

"It will never do to encourage this," thought her ladyship, but she had sufficient tact to conceal her own perturbation, let its source be what it might.

"My dear John," said she, "this is really too preposterous. It is carrying sentiment to the verge of sentimentality. You meet a girl at a post-office who bears some fancied resemblance to your dead wife, and straightway long to claim her as the child you saw drowned before your own eyes! Miss Stapleton—I think you called the young person—must have supposed you demented, laying claim to her sister. No wonder she thought you rude. It is really too absurd!"

And a little well-bred ghost of a laugh drew from the officer a retort that he had not made such an ass of himself to a stranger on the mere strength of a likeness.

At that moment the carriage drew up at Lady Dynevor's town residence, near Portland Place, and the subject dropped.

"You will come in, will you not?" and the lady paused for a reply ere she tripped up the steps.

"Thank you, no. I have a few arrangements to make before I depart, and shall dine at the club. My carriage and servants will be left at your disposal until my return."

"You will telegraph for me if it is anything serious?"

"Certainly."

Good-byes were exchanged. The major drove away to arrange for his journey by a night train to Rutherford Chase, on the borders of Derbyshire, where his elder brother, Sir Edwin, was suffering from the accidental bursting of a gun. (It was

on her return to London from a visit to Rutherford, which was not far removed from Dynevor Manor, that their sister had entered the train at Crewe and with her attendant had been seen by Hesba.) The lady sought her own chamber and the services of her maid, the Dinah Smart so frequently advertised for to so little purpose—Dinah, dressy as of old, cunning as of old, who seemed half afraid of her mistress, and of whom her mistress was *more* than half afraid.

Lady Dynevor was a widow, with one son and two daughters. The former, Lord Ernest Dynevor, was then at Oxford, reading for his "little go." Of the latter, the eldest, Clara, was then with her mother in town for her first season; the younger, Ernesta, at one of those establishments near Geneva where young ladies belonging to the poorer aristocracy may be educated at small cost in unexceptionable society. For the mansion near Portland Place her ladyship was indebted to the liberality of her own brothers, Sir Edwin and Major Rutherford, the latter of whom lived in the house with her, and kept a carriage and retinue of servants for her accommodation. It could scarcely be for his own, since he generally rode on horseback, and spent most of his time at his club.

For, be it admitted, Lady Dynevor was poor. When Dynevor Manor came into her hands at Lord Dynevor's death, as guardian for her son during his minority, so encumbered was the estate that her ladyship deemed it advisable to lease the manor for a term to a rich commoner, and retire to the Continent on her "settlements" with her children, then very young. But those settlements bore no proportion to the dowry she had given to his spendthrift lordship in exchange for a title, and at his death she discovered that both diplomacy and economy were necessary to maintain her position and rank in society.

She had, therefore, gone abroad, and, going abroad, had advertised for a "young ladies' maid who did not object to travel," and this being answered by Dinah, then under notice from Mrs. Stapleton, the testimonials put in were accepted, and when Dinah was "wanted" in England she was sunning herself under the vines of Switzerland, and turning her various talents to account in Lady Dynevor's service; her little peculiarities of diction being of no moment there; especially as with her natural sharpness she began to polish in contact with those she now served.

Dinah's self-importance had risen with her rise on the social ladder; she looked back with disdain to the days when she had been required to "wait on a foundling no better than one's self." There was a wide distance between a child with no right even to her name and young ladies and a mistress who had name and title both. She stood in supreme awe of rank; there could be no familiarity between Lady Dynevor and her daughters' maid, there could be no playing off elfish tricks on young ladies who had known their own superiority from the cradle; and her native cunning taught that her workhouse experience was best kept in the background. Her deft fingers, her skill in cutting and contriving, in re-arranging toilettes, in transforming old garments into new, made Dinah an acquisition, and kept her so fully and congenially employed she had little leisure for mischief.

She was not given to speak the truth on all occasions, but Lady Dynevor was herself a believer in the doctrine of "expediency," and was the more indulgent on that score to a maid who kept down her milliners' bills, and was at once quick, tasty, and deferential.

Four years had this "treasure of a maid" served her ladyship, when Major Rutherford, on the point of embarking with his regiment for Ireland, chanced to send his sister a couple of Liverpool newspapers. Had the same newspapers been sent to her ladyship in busy London or amongst guests at Dynevor Manor, it is probable they would have been barely glanced over or tossed aside; in Switzerland, where there was alike dearth of news and of occupation, they were *read*. In so reading, Lady Dynevor came across two advertisements, which, although dissimilar, she had no difficulty in piecing together.

Dinah was summoned. They were laid before her. Utterly unprepared, she was taken at a disadvantage; her native stolidity forsook her. She changed colour, and then, after four years, she was asked once more what she knew of Captain Stapleton's will.

It was in vain she protested she knew nothing. Her uncomfortable change of colour had been noted. Lady Dynevor recalled that Dinah's character had purported to come from a Mrs. Cooke; yet here a reward was offered for a missing will and a missing servant-maid in terms which left no doubt that a Mrs. Stapleton had been Dinah Smart's mistress, and that the maid was supposed to have some connection with the disappearance of a will.

"Your denial has no weight with me," said Lady Dynevor, "A girl who could abstract a will would not hesitate to deny her iniquity. It is clear as noonday that you are the person advertised for; and people do not waste money in advertising without good reason. It is evident you are suspected."

Dinah appealed to her lady if she had not served her with fidelity for four years.

"Yes, Smart, to the best of my belief; but as you evidently came to me with a false character, there must have been something wrong in your antecedents, and I shall have no alternative but to hand you over to the authorities and to communicate with the advertisers."

Dinah dropped on her knees. "Oh, my lady, *don't!* I never had father or mother to teach me what was right or what was wrong. But, oh, my lady, *don't* give me up, and I'll tell you all I know; I will indeed."

And then, in her dreadful fear of a foreign prison, Dinah, still on her knees, confessed that whilst dusting a room she had seen old Mrs. Stapleton put a folded paper in a little drawer in a bureau, and there being a bit of the paper sticking out when the old lady was called away, curiosity prompted her to look what it was. She had barely seen the word "Will" on the paper when she heard footsteps, and thrust the paper back; that she could scarcely get the door shut, for the paper stuck fast; and in her flurry to seem dusting she broke a bottle of magnesia; and that was all she knew of the will, if she should never speak again!

"Yet it is clear you are suspected," repeated her ladyship loftily.

"I don't think it's for *that*, my lady, I'm wanted. It's for something I took," and Dinah's voice sank to a whisper.

"Took?" questioned Lady Dynevor, sharply.

"Yes, my lady; but, oh, my lady, I did not mean to steal them. I only put them on to look fine when I went out, and when I came back the bundle was gone, and I could not put them away," and Dinah wrung her hands in the anguish of one whose sin had found her out when least expected, in a foreign land, and after all those years. She was utterly cowed, all her pertness and assumption gone.

"Them—and the bundle—explain yourself."

Dinah did explain, and the explanation that she had taken

a child's sleeve-bands from a bundle in the nursery cupboard to wear as a pair of bracelets involved the story of Mercy's miraculous preservation, her careful nurture by the Stapletons, and the bundling together of the babe's clothing to be preserved as a clue to its parentage.

Dinah's big head was bowed in her little brown hands, or she would surely have noted the strange agitation of Lady Dynevor as she proceeded, and the clenching of the white jewelled hand resting on the marble table beside her.

It did strike her that there was a huskiness in her lady's voice as she asked what Smart had done with the sleeve-bands, and bade her hasten and bring them for inspection.

"You are not going to send for the perlice, my lady?" urged Dinah, with a frightened face.

"I must think about it. Let me see the things you stole."

"I'm glad I told her nothing of the sovereign, or them papers," thought Dinah, as she went, and there was a scintillation of the old defiant doggedness in her eyes when she came back with the trinkets.

By that time Lady Dynevor had recovered her self-possession. She raised her eye-glass to examine the monogram on the gold clasps, which she carried to the window for inspection, possibly to conceal her own emotions, for there was a battle with the Evil One going on in her secret heart. Presently she returned the bands to Dinah, with an injunction to lock them up and set a seal on her lips, or she, Lady Dynevor, would not be able to screen her. She was willing, she said, to give Smart an opportunity to recover her character; although the young woman must know she was liable for prosecution as a thief, and no jury would make the nice distinction between *taking* and stealing. "I am not sure that I am doing right in screening such an offence; am afraid, in fact, that I am compromising a felony, and I trust that my family will not be misplaced," was her closing remark.

Lady Dynevor, the *amour* mistress, threw open the casement for all after Dinah, promisely grateful, had gone from the apartment. "E. K." she murmured. "Yes, that was the monogram, Blanche Rutherford's initials, and bands of polished Gibraltar seed. There can be no question the child is theirs. Am I called upon to proclaim it? Blanche is dead, and John gave it up as lost from the first. The child has fallen into good hands, is well taken care of. She has no knowledge of any

other friends. To part them now would bring grief to all. And what would become of my Clara and Ernesta if their uncle's own child should be restored to him? And she would be nearer to Sir Edwin than *my* children. Oh! it is not to be thought of. All Ernest's hope of succession to Rutherford Chase would be gone. And years must pass before the Manor is clear of encumbrance. Surely I am not called upon to sacrifice my own children's interests for a child supposed to be drowned!"

And so she continued to argue with herself, fighting against conscience, until she hardened herself to keep the knowledge in her own breast, and close Dinah's lips with the terror of a criminal prosecution.

If it ever struck her that she was a greater criminal than her maid, she beat back the oppressive suggestion with the sophistry that she could only think of her own children; that it was a mother's first duty.

Two more years, in which no allusion was made to the condemnatory trinkets, served to lull conscience to sleep and set my lady's mind at ease.

The shock Major Rutherford had received at the post-office was nothing to the shock he transmitted to Lady Dynevor in his own carriage.

It was her care to prevent a second such meeting.

And in order to keep a better watch over Dinah she was promoted to be my lady's own maid.

CHAPTER XVIII.

GRANDMA'S LETTER.

GRANDMA STAPLETON'S envelope covered two enclosures besides the stamps and money-order; there was the returned letter as well as the reply to Hesba's last, and were both common property.

To secure themselves against intrusion whilst these were perused, the two girls retreated to their chamber, and Hesba, seated by the dressing-table, cast her eye hurriedly over their contents, then read aloud passage after passage to Mercy, who knelt beside her to listen with an arm around the sisterly waist, the chestnut curls against her shoulder, just as she used to lean against Brian before he was taken from them.

Many had been the emotions of the agitated writer, and so on the face of the reader smiles and tears alternated; but certainly the surprise and indignation of Mrs. Stapleton at what she called Mr. Mason's latest act of treachery could not have been greater than that of Hesba, on learning that the first intimation of their removal had come through Mr. Forsyth's casual observation and inquiries, and that the note entrusted to Mr. Capper had never reached Larch Cottage.

"So!" reflected Hesba, as she read, "Mr. Capper's obsequious attention was *not* to be trusted! There was clearly a reason for my antipathy to the sympathetic young gentleman. Thank you, grandma! Forewarned, forearmed. I never make him my courier again, and I certainly will do my best to keep him at a distance."

"I wonder if we ever shall meet Dinah again, as grandma says," put in Mercy; but Hesba by this time was occupied with the details of Willie Forsyth's curt reception during his inquiries for them. A flush rose to her face as she read, and may be, it had its origin as much in pleasure at being so persistently sought for, as in annoyance at the insults the seeker encountered in his search.

We cannot follow both letters *seriatim* through the scraps of news, the sudden outbursts of emotion the kind old lady could not keep under, or the sober advice with which her missives

closed; yet must we give *in extenso* Mrs. Stapleton's reply to some of Hesba's proposals:—

"You are quite right, my dear, under existing circumstances, in your desire to strike out an independent and useful career for yourself, and in my opinion the study and practice of medicine by women, for *women and children*, is greatly to be encouraged, and I shall certainly offer no impediment to your preparation for entering the profession. Your grandfather knew a Mrs. Thorpe, of Manchester, the widow of a surgeon, who, having been instructed and utilised by him as an assistant, at his death opened an apothecary's shop, which was generally crowded with mothers bringing children, for the treatment of whose diseases her skill had a wide-spread reputation. This was at least forty years ago, and I think mainly influenced your grandfather to qualify me to treat a sick child in an emergency. But I have been only a dabbler, *giving* my services to those who had no money to pay fees, no *time* to spare for hospitals; and I had not to pass any ordeal of public study or examination. Dr. Forsyth bids me warn you that both are severe, and test the nerve of an ordinary man, and that not alone a strong bias, but a strong nerve and a keen sense of duty will be needed to carry you through. Then he would remind you of the mobbing of the lady students by their male competitors at Edinburgh last year, and its results, to show that *at present* there is much opposition to be encountered, and no British diploma to be obtained by a woman, however high her honours, however profound her knowledge and acquirements. But, my dear Hesba, in the sixty-three years of my life, I—who remember the change from tallow candles and stage coaches to gas and steam locomotion—have seen so many old theories exploded, so many prejudices die out, so many revolutions in society and opinion, especially with regard to the condition and capacity of my own sex, that I feel assured you will not be driven to Paris or Geneva to take a medical degree unrecognisable in England, but that by the time your studies are completed, and yourself of an age to practise, some one of our British Medical Colleges will have had the magnanimity and good sense to lay its gates and its honours open to women. It is the law of progress, and simply a question of time.

"Still, it will not do for you to plunge into this thing blindly; so Mr. Forsyth will furnish you, by the next post, with a letter of introduction to the house-surgeon of one of the hospi-

tals, who will open the eyes of your inexperience by an insight into hospital practice. And if after that you are of the same mind, I will supply the requisite funds.

"But you cannot take any step of this kind without the knowledge and sanction of Mr. Mason, so long as you are under his control. Make him acquainted with your aspirations; and if he prove an obstructive, let me know.

"The same observation applies to Mercy. By all means let her remarkable talent be cultivated. The likelihood of finding her parents is infinitesimally small; and as my annuity dies with me, it will be well for her to have so congenial a means of support in her own fingers. So let her join a good Art School as speedily as may be. Your new acquaintance, Miss Agnew, will doubtless advise you on this point. Mercy's charming 'letter' was a convincing proof of her genius. Willie Forsyth went into raptures over it, and offered to get the drawing framed for me; but—the cunning rogue!—I don't expect to see the portrait again."

("I'm glad they liked it," interrupted Mercy, her cheeks as rosy with satisfaction as were Hesba's.)

"He will be coming to London shortly to walk the hospitals and pass his examination; and, if I were not keeping a home open here for our dear Brian, there is no knowing what I might be tempted to do in my old age, I feel so deeply the anomaly of your position with Mr. Mason and his presuming nephew, and no female friend at hand. Nothing can be done with the Birkenhead property until you are of full age to give a legal receipt, or the missing will turns up; but do not let that trouble you. My wants are few, and it will be a gratification to help either Mercy or you forward."

"How like good, dear grandma!" cried Hesba, as she folded up her letter. "Willing to help anyone without any thought for herself!"

"Like you, too, Hesba, or what would have become of me?" said Mercy, nestling closer to her sister.

"What will become of either of us if I sit dawdling here?" quoth Hesba, lightly, springing to her feet and casting off the hat and wrap she had retained in her impatience to read the Woodside despatches. "Jemima, I can hear, is already lighting the gas, and unless I make haste Mr. Mason will be home for dinner before I have written to thank grandma and the Forsyths."

"Don't forget to say that I thank grandma, too, with all my heart. And be sure to tell her of the strange gentleman who paid for the letter," suggested Mercy, as Hesba sat down to her desk, and nodded assent. Then she went on in half soliloquy, "I wonder what made him stare so hard at me?"

"Maybe he admired your winsome countenance," replied Hesba, without looking up.

"Nay, I don't think that was it, he looked so sorrowful. I should like to know who he was, and who I reminded him of," and Mercy sat down by the fire in a dreamy sort of way to think of the stranger, and of Brian, and the home grandma was keeping for him, and how long it might be before they saw him again; and if he would be the same brother Brian, and as fond of her when he was out of his time and could leave the sea; and if it were true that Hesba could tell, by her own sensations, if he were ill or well, and would really know if any disaster befel him; it was all so curious. Then her thoughts strayed to Mr. Capper's exceeding attention to Hesba, and what it all meant, thence wandered to Mr. Mason. At this point she suddenly interrupted the writer with the question,

"Hesba, do you mean to tell Mr. Mason what we are going to do?"

Hesba looked up, put the tip of her penholder to her white teeth. "That requires consideration. Certainly not till I have received and presented Dr. Forsyth's letter of introduction. I owe it to others that my strength of mind should be tested before I take decided steps; and so I have told grandma."

"Oh! I was afraid lest you might," said Mercy, as if relieved, and no more was said.

The letter was finished; there was a hurried rush to the post and back, and as hurried a rush to change old morning dresses for evening ones not much fresher or newer.

Mr. Mason did not come home to dinner; only Mr. Capper, who came provided with a couple of tickets for a fashionable concert, and requested Hesba to "be quick over dressing, and to put on something more lively than black," with quite an air of proprietorship.

It was amusing to witness his blank astonishment when Hesba quietly declined the honour he was desirous to confer. He begged to be favoured with her reasons.

"They are threefold. I cannot go to any place of the kind

unaccompanied by my sister or Mr. Mason. I do not feel inclined to leave her at home alone. And I have no suitable attire."

"*Sister*, indeed!" said he, with a curling lip. "I do not see why that chit should stand in the way of our evening's entertainment. And as for dress, I thought a woman could always improvise a dress with a few trinkets, or bits of ribbon and lace.

"Possibly," replied Hesba coolly, "if she be so inclined, and should happen to possess the trifling accessories of ribbon, lace, and trinkets; but Mr. Mason has not thought proper to hand my mother's lace and trinkets over to me, not even those my father gave to her; nor has he supplied me with pocket-money to expend on such trifles; and, moreover, the inclination to accompany you is wanting."

Mr. Capper bit his under lip to keep in his temper. His brows met, and when they did he looked unpleasantly like Mr. Mason.

"Inclination wanting for a concert, and you so musical!" he exclaimed, either wilfully or obtusely misunderstanding her. "You'll change your tune one of these days. If my uncle had been here, you would not have dared to refuse."

"Had your uncle been here, sir, you would have been constrained to address me as a gentleman should."

He felt that to be true, and, feeling also that he had made a mistake, did his best to apologise, as a preliminary to persuasion. At length, finding that eloquence and blandishments availed as little as his self-satisfied presumption, he quitted the room abruptly, muttering as he went, that "the tickets need not be lost," and shortly afterwards the front door was heard to close with a bang.

After that, for a few days, the young gentleman presented an air of injured dignity extremely satisfactory to Hesba, his chilling politeness being far preferable to his ordinary familiarity, not to say warmth. He had a habit of taking her hand and pressing it, regardless of her frowns; of whispering confidential compliments, and of using an endearing epithet now and again. He made a point of bringing his seat next to hers, would throw his arm across the back of her chair, and *once* the arm had dropped to her waist; but she had risen and left the room with such a glance of indignation in her speaking eyes he had not repeated the offence.

That Mr. Mason was cognisant she felt convinced. She had never been called upon to play or sing until Theobald Capper was there to turn over her music, and she had a notion that her stepfather's nap after dinner, or his occasional absence from dinner, was but a ruse to favour his nephew's advances. She had done her best to discourage and keep the young man at a distance, and had an impression that his persistent obtuseness and pertinacity was based on his uncle's warrant. Of this she had proof ere long.

Mr. Forsyth's letter had been received and presented. The house-surgeon had duly honoured his friend's introduction. She had been taken over the hospital—into the accident-ward, into the dissecting-room—and, though her lip turned white more than once, she only said to her courteous and intelligent conductor, as she saw sensitive women and children shrink from question and touch, "I think, sir, it is quite time that feminine skill was brought to bear on cases such as these. The training may be unpleasant for the pioneers, but they will be the trainers of their sisters in turn when much that is to us disagreeable will be done away with. The mental suffering I have seen superadded to bodily pain has strengthened my resolution, not discouraged me." And when she shook hands with him on leaving the building, the surgeon complimented her on her bravery, and said she might command his services, either in the way of advice or introduction.

She had previously held counsel with Miss Agnew in the vestibule of the British Museum (not presuming to invite their one acquaintance to afternoon tea, or to accept the invitation of that young lady, a clergyman's daughter, to her third-floor lodgings in Keppel Street, shared with her sister, a daily governess), and the kindly art-student, herself struggling against difficulties, struck with Mercy's enthusiastic devotion to her pencil and the signs of that inspiration in her sketches without which enthusiasm would count for nothing, had recommended her entrance into an art-school in the vicinity where she was herself enrolled.

"You must understand," she said, "that, notwithstanding Miss Mercy's present proficiency, she will be put back to begin *de novo*, and being young would most likely be kept at free-hand and model-drawing much longer than is in her case necessary. I will, however, do my best to see her pushed forward and

ready for the examiners next spring. Not that she will need urging; but I can assure you, Miss Stapleton, from my own experience and that of others, the students help and stimulate each other more than the teachers do. In some art-schools the masters are active and vigilant, but there is always one evil to contend with, and that is the multiplicity and change of masters, each of whom has his special style and special crotchets. One will come round—'Miss Agnew, I should like that outline clearer, this shadow deeper.' I strengthen the outline, deepen the shadow. 'Oh, that will never do!' says the other the next day; 'rub it all out, your outlines and shadows are ridiculously strong.' And this is apt to confuse one's ideas, and weaken one's belief in the master's infallibility. Still the art-schools have done good work, especially to poor students like myself who could not otherwise pay for living models. And they give a good preliminary training to those who can afford to finish in the studio of a first-class artist; a course I should recommend to your sister."

Some correspondence with Grandma Stapleton followed, still through the medium of the post-office; funds were supplied, and Mercy entered the Queen's Square School of Art, studying geometry and botany with Hesba at home.

Hesba hesitated to lay her projects and plans before Mr. Mason, confident that he would oppose them, although she had paid her fees at the Ladies' Medical College and commenced a course of study; the absence of Mr. Mason and Theobald Capper during the day and frequently during the evening also, enabling this to be done, especially as she had no housekeeping to occupy her time, Jemima receiving all orders in the morning for her own mistress to execute.

How the girls passed their time during the day, or how they obtained the little feminine accessories which preserved their wardrobes and appearance from utter shabbiness, Mr. Mason never stooped to inquire. He had a daily newspaper, and his nephew brought a cheap novel into the place now and then; and so long as he remained in lodgings and entertained his business friends at his City club, his position was in no wise affected by the petticoated encumbrances at home.

Theobald Capper, however, had younger eyes. Aggrieved at his rebuff over the concert, he assumed that want of suitable attire lay at the root of Hesba's refusal to bear him company.

Had she not said she had no dress? Had she not treated her want of trinkets and trimmings as a grievance? Besides he did not care to have a shabby companion with him at church. And he should like to show her off at a theatre or concert now and then. She'd go, he was sure, if she had only dress to set her off. He would have a serious talk to his uncle about it. All girls liked finery. No doubt she would be more amiable if not forced into the background by her want of suitable raiment.

He did speak to his uncle. And in his interference to remedy the evil for his own after benefit, he did the two a good turn, and it might have been, an ill turn at the same time.

He combated his uncle's theory that it was useless to throw money away in dress for girls so long as no one knew them, representing that he was ashamed to be seen at church with them, and had no chance of winning Hesba so long as he was prevented from taking her about and making himself agreeable.

Mr. Mason set his lips, knit his bushy brows, and pressed his finger-tips together—but he opened his purse. Not that he supplied the fair maidens with cash. No; he took them himself to a well-known and busy drapery establishment in Oxford Street, inquired for the head of the millinery department, gave succinct orders for their outward equipment, and whilst Hesba and Mercy made their selection, subject to his veto, he held a private conference with the forewoman. In the midst of it Hesba, trying on a mantle in front of a pier-glass, caught the reflection of their two figures, and fancied he was calling the milliner's attention to Mercy. There was nothing remarkable in that, seeing that an assistant with an inch-tape was taking measurements for a frock. But crossing the show-room to look at a hat, she caught the words, "Rather young—not until Spring," and wondered what they could be talking about. It slipped from her mind in the business of the moment, and was not recalled for months.

And during these months the winter passed, and still Hesba, so prompt in other matters, hesitated to confide in her stepfather—consult him she had not done; but when March came blustering in, and there were signs and tokens of another removal, she judged it advisable to speak.

CHAPTER XIX.

MR. MASON HAS A CHECK.

For some time the double cost of living in furnished apartments and of warehousing his household goods and chattels had weighed heavily on Mr. Mason's mind; so heavily that, notwithstanding his ordinary reticence, calculations and murmurs of impatience had escaped him. He held communication—it could scarcely be called conversation—with his nephew on the relative merits of certain districts, the style and character of the inhabitants. The morning paper was left behind, with blanks where "Houses to Let" had been advertised, and presently house-agents' lists were being turned over, consulted, and marked.

Certainly nothing was said to Hesba on the subject, but she must have been blind not to see what was in contemplation. She had, however, no inclination to be carried off like a doll or a baby a second time.

In the midst of this a rumour reached her through Jemima, which had its confirmation in certain objectionable hints and remarks of Mr. Theobald Capper, who was as ungracious to Mercy as he was oppressively civil to herself, that she and her foster-sister were about to be separated.

Then it was she thought it needful to lay before Mr. Mason her own plans for both, seizing an opportunity when they were alone together.

A sudden rise or fall in the money market would have taken him less by surprise. He threw himself back on the lounge from which he had just risen, and, bringing the finger tips of both hands together, looked up in her face as she stood before him on the hearthrug, and said with the cold, incisive sneer he kept for his dependents or inferiors,

"Indeed, Miss Stapleton! Art and medicine! And, pray, to whom are we indebted for the selection of *professions* for the young people under my charge? That doctoring grandmother of yours, I presume, and her medical retinue."

Hesba drew up at this treason against her best friends.

"No, sir; the proposition was mine only. My desire to study

medicine can be no new idea to you. Yourself named it to Dr. Mitchell, and you could not be ignorant of the scientific instruction I received from the kind old gentleman with this very end in view. But I may add that the proposal has my dear grandmamma's unqualified sanction, as also with respect to Mercy."

"Ah! I thought as much. And with respect to Mercy——?" He bent his body forward, set his thin lips together, and seemed to await reply.

"Well, sir; need I remind you how far back *you* saw the dawning faculty of the child, and fostered it by a birthday-gift of a colour-box? or, how frequently after that the child was punished for exercising her art-instinct with the only materials within her reach. She has the true spirit of art. Her genius only requires direction and training."

"Precisely—direction and training—an art-education for a foundling adopted by others, and a medical education for a stepdaughter! And I am expected to fall in with this delectable scheme for emptying my purse!"

"Oh, no, sir," replied Hesba, with the very faintest echo of his sarcastic tones. "We expect and seek nothing from you but your concurrence. Grandma will bear all expenses, both for Mercy and myself."

"Ah! It is as I thought. They have been in constant communication. That accounts for the composure with which removal from Liverpool has been borne," ran swiftly through his brain, though it found no expression in the utterance of his thin lips.

"Indeed! then I shall not permit it. If you do not scruple to intrench on Mrs. Stapleton's meagre income for an absurd whim, I do. At the same time I admit the necessity for the foundling you call your sister having a means of self-support. It is time that strangers were no longer burdened with her maintenance; and I have already taken measures for her entrance into a house of business, where the 'artistic talent' and 'love of the beautiful,' on which you lay so much stress, may be exercised usefully on caps and bonnets, without any preliminary spoiling of paper and canvas."

Hesba listened, mute with pain. He went on in cold composure, "And as her term of apprenticeship commences next Monday, perhaps you had better collect her clothes and any other little odd matters, and have them packed in a suitable box, ready."

Then Hesba broke forth. "You surely cannot intend to cast my sister, a mere child, out into the world, to earn her living in a stifling work-room, to spend her days and nights amongs strangers, and it may be soil her pure life in the contact."

"Miss Hesba, I have no ears for heroics. I mean to put a living into the girl's hands without delay. And I consider that I am doing her a service for which she has reason to be grateful. Remember, she is no more a child of mine than she is a sister of yours. I do not choose to recognise relationship. And let me add that I do not consent to your scheme for yourself. The superintendence of my house will furnish you with study and employment; and Theobald will have no wife of his mixed up with drugs and hospitals."

Hesba's ears tingled as she listened. She looked him straight in the face. "What Mr. Capper's wife may do does not affect me in the least. I shall certainly not regulate my course by *his* wishes."

"Indeed! We will see to that. You cannot be ignorant of my nephew's intentions; and if unaware of mine, you know them now. He has honoured you in his choice, and I shall expect you to become his wife, and that before the end of the year, when I shall take him into partnership." The speaker had already his hat in his hand and left the room without another word, although he must have heard the tone of proud resolve in her reply.

"*Honoured!* I think, sir, if the one partnership wait for the other, there is likely to be some delay."

Hesba found Mercy drenched in tears on her knees by their bedside. The foregoing colloquy had been held with the drawing-room door partially open, and Mercy, about to enter, had heard just so much as sent her back to their chamber in an agony of grief.

Hesba drew her up into a close embrace, and, seated on the edge of the bed, kept her arms around her whilst she strove to stem the falling tears. It was not an easy task. Dinah's heartless speech, that "Mercy belonged to nobody," had full possession of her. She had, moreover, a fixed belief that Mr. Mason was the embodiment of power. He had sent Brian away, had brought them to London, and was now about to tear her from Hesba—she could not bear it. "I know I shall never see you or Brian again," she sobbed.

Finding other solace unavailing, Hesba treated her to a mock-heroic account of the "honour" designed for herself, and Mr. Mason's "expectations;" but Mercy took it not so lightly. "Oh, Hesba! he will *make* you marry him; I know he will."

"And *I* know he will *not*, and I do not intend him to separate us. But you must dry your eyes and put on your bonnet, for there is no time to lose. A telegram must go to grandma at once; and then we must look up Miss Agnew."

The telegraph was set at work, and messages went flashing to and fro, whilst, obedient to Mr. Mason's instructions, Hesba began to pack up; and if she packed more than Mr. Mason bargained for, who was to be the wiser?

On the Saturday forenoon a man with a truck came for Miss Stapleton's boxes. He had been expected, and there was neither demur nor surprise. And what more natural than the customary morning walk of the young ladies?

When Mr. Mason came home to dinner, along with Mr. Theobald Capper, a note by the side of his plate informed him that "Mrs. Stapleton, not being anxious for a closer alliance with his family, and as little willing to see an unprotected orphan of tender years offered up as a victim to fashion on the altar of a milliner's work-table, has relieved him of his responsibilities and the burden of their maintenance."

It was not possible for Mr. Mason's face to grow whiter, but that of Theobald Capper certainly did. In his self-conceit he had made so certain of Hesba that this billet shook him like an earthquake. He sank on a chair in utter blank consternation and dismay. He was able to realise then what Willie Forsyth might have felt under similar circumstances.

His uncle, who had hitherto known nothing stronger than his own will, set his livid lips close, his black brows bridging his sharp nose, as he felt that will set at naught—his imperial self treated with scorn and contumely. The tables turned upon himself most irritatingly. And to make matters worse, he felt he had been foiled by a mere girl. The question was now, "What had become of them?"

The envelope was examined. The note was turned over and over. There was neither postmark nor location to serve as a clue. It was clear to *them* the writer was in London.

Jemima was summoned and questioned. Whatever suspicions she might have had, she had her answers prompt and ready.

She "had been told a man would come for Miss Mercy's luggage. How was she to know he was not the right man, or had come at the wrong hour? How was she to know how much luggage there would be? She did not know the young ladies had gone away for good. She supposed they had gone for a walk, poor things!" So nothing was to be made of Jemima.

There was nothing to be done but to order up the delayed dinner and sit down to it with mortification as a digestive. And whether it was the unsavouriness of that same sauce, or of the half-cold viands, uncle and nephew came nearer to quarrelling over the meal than they had done in their lives. Theobald Capper, with little enough reason, considering his own hints and innuendoes, blamed Mr. Mason for exposing his intentions with regard to Mercy, and the latter accused his nephew of "want of tact" in his wooing.

"*You* would never make a diplomatist," he said with scorn, "you should have won the girl's confidence first. Been sympathetic over that vagabond brother of hers, and made a pet of that waif Mercy."

"You did not, sir!"

"The more reason you should. The way to her heart was through others. You bought flowers for your own button-hole. If you had bought them for that child to paint, you would have won the other over. And if you had brought a few little gifts home now and then——"

"It was no use, I did try it on. A pair of gloves one time, a necktie another, a brooch"——

"And she declined them?"

"Yes."

"You idiot, you should have brought duplicates for Mercy, if you wished her to accept favours for herself. But I have told you over and over again you took too much for granted. Do you think I should have married the mother if I had pursued *your* tactics. You showed your hand, and lost the game. And now the girl's gone and her property with her. You've been a fool, Theobald, a fool."

"I followed your lead, uncle—in any case. And I suspect the note I gave to you which should have gone to Mrs. Stapleton lies at the root of *my* ill-luck," and never was the likeness of uncle and nephew more apparent than as they thus confronted each other with lowering brows;—baffled and beaten.

They rose from the table in too ill-humour to bear the society of each other, and soon both were out of doors on a bootless errand.

No railway official or cabman could remember such an old lady as Mrs. Stapleton coming into either station from Liverpool, or two such young ladies or their luggage going out to Liverpool. Jemima's description of the porter with the truck was far too vague for identification. They had vanished and left no clue. Robert Mason had given them a lesson, and they had certainly profited by his instruction.

The consciousness did not make him one whit more amiable, or his nephew either.

On the following evening (Sunday), Mr. Mason penned a letter to Mr. Septimus Crowe, requesting information respecting Mrs. Stapleton's whereabouts and movements.

In a couple of days he received a reply. Mrs. Stapleton was at Larch Cottage. Telegraph-boys had been seen coming and going through the avenue gates for several days, and Mrs. Stapleton was as often backwards and forwards at Dr. Forsyth's.

Here was proof that Mrs. Stapleton could not be in London, and it was clear Hesba had been in communication with her from the first, else where had she found money for telegrams?

Again Jemima was summoned. No letters had come there for Miss Stapleton except one which had been refused as "not known." She had "supposed the young ladies was named Mason."

A fortnight or more went by. Another communication from Mr. Crowe. Larch Cottage was empty and "to let." Mrs. Stapleton had quitted Woodside in company with young Mr. Forsyth. Destination supposed to be London.

Mr. Crowe had told enough, and more than enough. Theobald Capper was as mad with jealousy as was Mr. Mason with vindictive spleen. The latter had now a handsome suburban villa on his hands, and never a housekeeper to preside over it or even direct the arrangement of the goods and chattels lying there in indiscriminate confusion where the Pantechnicon people had put them out of hand.

A fine house, where he could entertain moneyed men, was part of Mr. Mason's business capital, but that entertainment could scarcely be done efficiently without a lady at the head of the establishment. An educated, well-bred housekeeper such

as he required he had found to be a much more expensive commodity than a wife, and under the conviction that a young matron was better than no matron at all, he was desirous to press forward Hesba's marriage with his nephew Theobald.

He had expected her to be so dazzled with the prospect of presiding over his magnificent establishment that any scruples she might have as to taking the handsome husband he had provided for her into the bargain would vanish into thin air. And in so arranging he considered he was doing his duty to his dead wife—aye, and to his drowned friend, Captain Stapleton. Of course he had taken that "bit of Birkenhead property" into calculation. Septimus Crowe had ferreted out that it was a freehold lying close to the docks, was wanted for wharfage, and rising rapidly in value. It would be a nice little capital for Theobald to bring into the concern as a partner. It was not pleasant to be baffled in his benevolent schemes for the benefit of everybody! And who could say that his plans for Mercy were not dictated by good-feeling and common-sense? Was it not better that she was placed where she could get her own living at once, instead of hanging on others like a pauper. Really he was much misunderstood, and treated with gross ingratitude.

In so far as Theobald Capper had been admitted into the arcana of his uncle's plans, he concurred in this opinion, but being—apart from all his calculations, and in a selfish sort of way—genuinely in love with Hesba Stapleton, it follows that he considered the wrong and slight personal.

We may exonerate Hesba from ingratitude. Love does not come at anybody's bidding. Neither uncle nor nephew had understood this, and the latter, as the former said, had claimed as a right that which a wiser man would have sought as a boon. And she had too often been constrained to interpose between his insults and Mercy to have much respect left for *him*. Of Mr. Mason's plans for her own promotion she had no more knowledge than he had vouchsafed in the one characteristic interview. She saw through his scheme for Mercy, and that was sufficient. How should she answer Brian if she deserted the helpless one left in her charge?

Miss Agnew and her sister occupied three scantily-furnished apartments in Keppel Street, up many flights of stairs and very near the sky, their sole advantage being retirement, cheapness,

and proximity to the field of their labours. Here, after seeing the telegram authorising the step Hesba was taking, Miss Agnew had offered her and Mercy a safe refuge until Mrs. Stapleton herself should arrive; and there being no room in the house vacant, the kindly-disposed young lady improvised a shake-down in her studio for herself and sister, who surrendered their own chamber to the refugees, apparently only concerned that the accommodation was so meagre.

"Indeed," they explained, "papa's living was a very poor one, and when he died we were left utterly unprovided for, except in the matter of education. So we have every reason to be thankful that we have been enabled to maintain ourselves and *keep together* in a home of our own, little as it resembles the cosy, ivy-covered vicarage of our childhood. At first our struggles were very great, and our sensitiveness had many shocks; still we did our best to be cheerful under discouragement, and now we are rubbing on pretty well considering. We, however, have learned to dispense with many things once considered necessaries, and prefer to lay aside the small sums we can spare against a possible time of sickness or other mischance, to the purchase of what we now call luxuries."

There were books, pictures, framed and unframed, china ornaments, and a few other odd matters which told of an anterior and different state of things, and if there were no soft couches or luxurious chairs, and the carpets were mere scraps, everything was clean and orderly. And the arrangements were not either vulgar or haphazard.

Grandma Stapleton's clear eye took note of all this when, on her arrival in London a fortnight later, she left Willie Forsyth with Mercy in her cab outside, and, mounting the stairs with Hesba to thank Miss Agnew for her kindness, the above apology was tendered for insufficient accommodation, and the old lady came down again, well satisfied with her scrutiny of the new friends and their surroundings.

Willie Forsyth's evident satisfaction was of another order and origin.

CHAPTER XX.

WITH GRANDMA.

KINDNESS begets kindness. Mrs. Stapleton was greatly moved by the service so generously and hospitably rendered to Hesba and Mercy by Miss Agnew and her sister, they making light of their own inconvenience, and only accepting reimbursement for absolute outlay on extreme pressure.

She had not left Larch Cottage, where all her married and widowed life had been spent, or its old-fashioned garden, where her husband's own hand had planted the larches and many a fragrant shrub besides, without a pang of regret, although she kept it to herself; and as she thought of those two young ladies reared in a "cosy, ivy-covered vicarage," living alone at the top of a tall dingy London lodging-house, with slated roofs and chimney-pots to bound their horizon, yet thankful that they had health and ability to earn an independent subsistence, she felt herself touched in the depths of her heart.

It stirred her, moreover, to say, when discussing the home question in their temporary lodgings near Euston Square with her own two girls,

"You see, my dears, I have kept the best of my furniture, sufficient to furnish a nice little house, that shall hold us comfortably, with a spare bed for Willie whilst he is in London, or Brian when he comes back to us. And don't you think it would be nicer for your two friends if I took one large enough to accommodate them also, and we all lived together? They must lead very isolated lives at the top of that tall building."

The two friends, who had been taken with Mrs. Stapleton's genial, motherly face, were of the same mind when the question was put to them, but, aware of their own economies, had their doubts about "living together," and they smiled at Mrs. Stapleton's expectation of finding a "nice little house" in the heart of London, or any house at all, moderately rented.

She soon discovered this to be correct. The "nice little house" had to be abandoned, and the good old lady resigned herself, though not without a sigh, to rent only a house in a

crescent near Bedford Square, which confronted a similar crescent at the opposite end of a short wide street. It was tolerably quiet, notwithstanding its proximity to the noisy thoroughfare of Tottenham Court Road, and had the further advantage of an open vista, as she observed; though she thought "the bare space in front of each crescent would have been more refreshing to the eye if planted with trees, or even laid with a coat of green turf."

It was no doubt a great change to her, at her time of life; but she made the best of the situation as being "for the good of the girls," and she regarded it quite as a compensation that two large trees had been suffered to retain their ground at the rear of the premises, and were putting forth infantile leaflets to show that they were alive, in spite of fog and smoke.

She said if she could only hear the sparrows twitter, and catch a glimpse of green leaves when she awakened in a morning, she might forget she was in London; and so she arranged to have her bedroom at the back, "to look out on the tall plane trees," as she said, in those busy days when, with Willie Forsyth's active help, her household gods were unpacked and distributed amid much chatter and light-hearted merriment.

Mercy clapped her hands and exulted as, one after another, familiar friends came to light. She rattled over the keys of the rather-out-of-tune cottage piano, danced on the old Indian carpet before Willie and Hesba had fairly unfolded and laid it down, nodded and talked to portraits as if they had been living realities, hailed the picture of the *Ariel* with a blithe "hurrah," and went into ecstasies over the Chinese junk and the soap-stone pagoda. She seemed half beside herself with delight; the depression which had settled on her countenance when Brian was torn from them had given place to smiles and glee. Upstairs or downstairs she ran with this thing or that, singing as she went; glass and china and chimney ornaments seemed to find their places by magic when her fingers touched them; and ever and anon she would stop in her carol or her work to fling her arms around Mrs. Stapleton's neck, and with a kiss and a hug proclaim, "You dear, good old grandma! I'm so happy."

She looked it; she felt it. "Home" was growing round her again, and she bade fair to be once more the living sunbeam of that home, there being no black-browed Mr. Mason to interpose a cloud.

Not less happy, if less demonstrative, was Hesba; but her

satisfaction was tempered with sober thoughts of the sacrifice of home ties and associations her grandmother had made for them, mingled with high resolves to repay devotion with devotion, and so apply herself to study that the good grandparent might never regret the sacrifice.

How homelike the strange rooms soon became under their hands, and none the less that Willie Forsyth was there; not certainly the Willie of her childhood, but still Willie Forsyth, Brian's old friend and hers. The bookcase was there, and the books—no longer under interdict, and their first-floor sitting-room seemed a marvellous reproduction of the common parlour at Woodside.

Larch Cottage, despite its unpretentious name, had been a many-roomed domicile; and although fully half the furniture had been sold, including, much to Hesba's regret, the old bureau, there was something of an overplus here.

Grandma Stapleton fidgeted about, puzzling how, without wounding their sensitiveness, she could offer that overplus to the young ladies who still kept their top rooms in Keppel Street independently.

She managed it, however, and a comfortable sofa found its way up the three pairs of stairs, a respectable carpet, curtains and sundry odd matters which changed the aspect of things for them, and made them no longer ashamed, if anyone chanced to call on business; mere visitors were out of the question quite.

Someone did call upon them ere long. Mr. Theobald Capper, by dint of perseverance, had managed to fish out Miss Agnew's name and address from either Jemima or some of the Museumites; but he was told that those he sought were under the protection of Mrs. Stapleton and Mr. Forsyth, was not informed where, and was not invited to repeat his visit.

Yet he came from time to time hanging and loitering about the premises on the chance of meeting Hesba, until the very lodging-house keeper threatened to give him in custody as a suspicious character.

The daily-governess and the industrious art-student had not themselves much leisure for visiting, and not much care to stir when they sat down wearied on an evening; but the monotony of their lives was broken up, and seldom a week passed without bringing one or both the Miss Agnews to the cheerful sitting-room in North Crescent, when the medical students would close their

books and Willie open the piano for Miss Cecilia, who said the instrument was a perfect boon to her, she was losing so much of her music for want of practice.

Out of this grew a weekly lesson in music for Mercy; for though Mrs. Stapleton told the girls they would have to economise to make all ends meet, she did not seem willing to stint their education. One thing she did: she informed them they would have to make all their own clothes, and remarking there were "no such facilities in her young days, when Hood sang his 'Song of the Shirt,'" she bought them a hand sewing-machine, to save time, labour, and eyesight; and seeing a longing eye cast on it more than once was prompt to offer the use of it to the Miss Agnews. The kindness they had done her grandchildren was being returned in numberless little ways, and still she held herself their debtor; possibly because she might exaggerate the evils from which Mercy and Hesba had fled.

And being in want of a servant maid, it came about that Jemima supplied that deficiency, well pleased, the frequent loitering about Bloomsbury Square of Theobald Capper, to pester her with inquiries respecting the young ladies, having lost her her situation there.

Mrs. Stapleton was quite in her element with so many young people about her, all busy, enthusiastic, and eager for distinction in their several pursuits. She had always an open ear for a story of difficulty, or disappointment, or rebuff, and always a healing word for the wounded spirit, a word of hope and encouragement when perseverance met with a check elsewhere. And who so pleased as she when they came in elated with their own success?

Willie had enrolled himself amongst the students of University Hospital, and was studying hard for his examination at Apothecaries' Hall. And Mrs. Stapleton saw nothing incongruous and nothing to alarm her in the interest he and Hesba took in each other's daily course, or their home studies, often side by side. It had been so when they were children; it was only natural it should be so now. If she saw a deeper meaning in it, read something in the young man's face that was not there in childhood, she must have been well content, for she only smiled, and said, "What a pleasant family party they were!"

Miss Agnew and Cecilia would say to each other on their way home that Mrs. Stapleton must be blind to Mr. Willie Forsyth's

devotion to her granddaughter; and Mercy would cast many a sly glance of intelligence across the table at the pair sitting with heads close together, discussing some knotty scientific point, or the one listening to the *resumé* of a clinical lecture from the other; but Hesba herself was too thoroughly engrossed with the important and intensely interesting study, which to her was something more than duty, to see or understand what was so palpable to others. She was always ready to analyse some hypothetical case of phthisis, or pneumonia, or aneurism, or to argue out a theory with Willie; but she had not yet begun to analyse her own heart, or to trouble herself with questions of his feelings towards her. A new existence had dawned for her, and she was perfectly content; but that the root of her content was Willie Forsyth had *not* dawned upon her.

As Mrs. Stapleton had said, they had to economise. The income which was more than ample for herself at Woodside was not sufficiently elastic to cover extra expenditure without economy. But no one minded that, and grandma's economy was not parsimony.

Yet, as clouds will cross the fairest skies, their one cloud was anxiety for Brian. Mrs. Stapleton had had a ship-letter from him shortly before she left Larch Cottage, in which he said he had almost to write by stealth, that no leisure was allowed him, and his education was fast slipping away from him, that now and then he had a hasty glance into his mother's Bible, and he might thank that and her few words of loving counsel for keeping him human amidst the blasphemy and callousness of the crew, the chief mate being the worst of the lot. They had encountered very rough weather, and had much sickness aboard in consequence of bad provisions, he said, and also that there was no knowing when they should see England again, as the captain was trading from port to port. He sent affectionate messages to all, but most to Mercy, wishing that he was at home for the sake of her and Hesba.

And now, as months rolled by, and nothing was heard of him, they grew anxious and uneasy; almost afraid to whisper their fears to each other. Even hopeful Mrs. Stapleton, who knew so well the exigencies and uncertainties of a sailor's life, maintained her cheerfulness with an effort.

At the same time it was a common cause for rejoicing that nothing was seen of Mr. Mason. No one met him, even in the street.

Had they known that he kept state in a fine suburban villa at Denmark Hill theywould scarcely have wondered. It was quite out of their range, and the same might almost be said of the City. Once or twice, Mr. Theobald Capper intruded on Miss Agnew's studies from the antique in the British Museum sculpture gallery, but an intimation that she should complain to the authorities sent him away disconcerted, with a scowl marvellously like his uncle's.

"I should like to give that fellow a sound drubbing," soliloquised Willie Forsyth when he heard. "What does he want Hesba's address for? Cannot he take 'no' like a man?"

How *he* might be inclined to take a "no" he did not ask himself. At all events he had taken *his* "yes" from the examiners of Apothecaries' Hall with sufficient modesty, and was again hard at work for his full diploma from the College of Surgeons.

It was about the same period that Hesba, returning from the last lecture of the winter session at the Ladies' Medical College, now in Great Portland Street, her mind full of the subject treated, was stopped at a crossing by a passing carriage. She always looked straight before her as she walked; now she chanced to look up, and surely enough there was Dinah in the rumble, and their eyes met. Hesba's finger was uplifted on the instant—there was a stare, but no recognition in the black optics.

"And I really do not think she knew me," was Hesba's comment when she reached the Crescent.

"Could you expect it?" was the reply. "Eight years exactly have gone over our heads since Dinah was dismissed: they will only have given permanence to her singularities; whilst you, my dear, have outgrown even your own recollection. It is a long stride from eleven to nineteen. She would remember me if she saw me. And who knows? I may happen to come across her some day when I am out shopping."

That did not happen; but stranger things did, and long before Dinah was seen again she had sunk to her natural littleness.

Even whilst Mrs. Stapleton was speaking, the postman was handing a letter to Jemima on the door-step, of more importance than its recipients could calculate or divine.

It was an official intimation that Larch Cottage stood in the way of a projected street, and would have to be pulled down; the price demanded for the premises was required to be known, as a preliminary to purchase.

The good old lady burst into tears. She was feeling the pressure of her straitened income sorely just then. Hesba and Mercy had both been working and studying more than was good for their health; the former at a children's hospital and the college, the latter for her second examination. She had been longing for a chance to send them both either to Woodside or a nearer sea-coast, to bring back vanished roses to their cheeks, and had at the same time a woman's consciousness that their wardrobes needed much replenishing, accompanied by the conviction that the means were wanting.

In that letter the means were assured. She was glad to have the desideratum supplied, but it made her heart ache to surrender Larch Cottage for that or any purpose. Had she not indulged a vague hope of going back to spend her last days there with her girls and Brian—Brian to whom the old home was to be a landmark, a refuge? And now the landmark was to be destroyed!

"What a thankless old creature I am!" said she, as she brushed her tears away. "The Lord offers me more than I desired, and I have not the grace to accept without cavilling. What does it matter where I die? And what landmark can Brian need whilst James Forsyth is on the spot?"

But James Forsyth was no more a fixture than was Larch Cottage.

CHAPTER XXI.

A PIECE OF FURNITURE, AND A PICTURE.

JAMES FORSYTH took up the matter for Mrs. Stapleton, saw the outgoing tenant compensated, and the purchase-money paid down. To transfer it, to bring a new medical work of his to a publisher, and to see how his son was conducting himself and his friends getting on, he made holiday and journeyed up to London. There chanced to be at the time a vacancy on the staff of a hospital devoted to the special class of diseases known to have been his peculiar study and theme. His medical brethren and others urged him to put himself in nomination for the post, with an assurance that his standing for election would be little more than a form.

He consented, went through the necessary formula, and back home to his patients, thinking to himself that he had just wasted so much ink and paper; and no one was more surprised than James Forsyth when his appointment was duly communicated to him by the secretary—unless, perhaps, it was Mrs. Forsyth, who did not wholly relish the good fortune which involved the disruption of friendships and the exodus of a family.

She insisted that it was folly to throw up his own established practice for an appointment which he might not keep, and to begin afresh in a strange place. He was not dealing fairly by Willie, who had expected to be his successor in the long run.

It ended, however, in the transfer of his Woodside house and practice to a stranger, and the removal of Mrs. Forsyth and the five olive branches to the metropolis, which, I need scarcely say, was not accomplished without a considerable amount of packing, leave-taking, and other bustle and confusion.

In the midst of it a strange man wanted Dr. Forsyth on business of importance. "I'm ower busy to see onybody," was the message sent out. "He maun be sae guid as send in his name an' his business."

Effie brought back for answer that the man's name was

Michael Smith, his occupation a dealer in old furniture, and that he *must* see the doctor before he went away.

"Aweel, I dinna care to be fashed at siccan a time, but if it maun be it maun be," and off went the surgeon reluctantly to the man standing in the hall amongst a labyrinth of boxes and packages.

"Aweel, Mr. Smith, an' what may you be wantin' th' noo?"

"Fifty pounds," said the man, coolly. James Forsyth's hand went up to his chin. "Fifty pounds!" he echoed, in a tone of mingled amazement and incredulity. "An' for what?"

"*This*," and the man held up a soiled, discoloured, folded paper.

A light flashed on the doctor's perceptions and irradiated his countenance. It was *the long-missing will.*

The fifty pounds demanded was the offered reward.

Be sure he did not keep Mr. Smith standing in the hall after that. There was an apologetic invitation to a seat in the dismantled parlour, a busy raid on the silver snuff-box, a brisk call for "whisky, water, and glasses," and an eager desire to "ken a' parteeculars."

But Michael Smith was not disposed either to regale himself, or to furnish particulars, or surrender the will until James Forsyth had drawn him a cheque for the fifty pounds.

Then the doctor was put in possession of the fact that when the residue of Mrs. Stapleton's movables were sent to an auction room to be sold, the furniture broker had attended the sale, and amongst other "lots" knocked down to him was an old bureau. He had put it in his shop, but it got stowed away in the background, and, being hid, hung on hand. Once or twice when it came to light he had lost the sale of it because the back was slightly out of repair. So he said to his wife he would take the old back off and put a fresh one on. He usually did such odd jobs as that for himself, and when he took the bureau in hand he discovered that at some time or other a new back had been nailed on the bureau, but it had been put on clumsily right over the original back, which was all cracked and flawed; and between the two backs he had found the will that had been advertised for, and one or two other papers besides, which he handed over along with it.

Mr. Forsyth was curious, and hurried off with the broker to examine the bureau. Immediately behind the small drawer in

which the will had been placed, and on a level with its top, he discovered a wide crack or gap, and also that a strip of wood must have been broken off the back of the drawer itself, leaving it lower than the sides. It was evident that the drawer had been overfull, and that opening it caused the uppermost paper to slide over this defective edge, and so on through the gap beyond into the hollow between the two backs caused by the warping of the newer wood.

Such was the explanation of James Forsyth when he bore the welcome news and the welcome document in person to those whom it most concerned.

"There's no disputing your executorship now, Mr. Forsyth," said Mrs. Stapleton, blithely, as she unlocked the door of a Japanese cabinet when the first excitement was over, and she there deposited the recovered will and the roll of notes which represented Larch Cottage, after repaying the fifty pounds the doctor had advanced. "Robert Mason will have to refund, and there will be no difficulty in getting a settlement from the Birkenhead people, either."

"Aweel," quoth the surgeon, as he took counsel with his snuff-box, "there'll be nae deeficulty wi' Miss Hesba's bit o' property; but Robert Mason will haud a' he's getten wi' a grip o' iron. He'll no gie up Brian's thousands, or even bonnie Mercy's shares, without a fight."

(You see they still accredited Robert Mason with the possession of those shares.)

"Then we must have a fight," cried Hesba, looking up from the sewing-machine she was sending round at a vigorous rate. "The law is stronger than iron, and my dead father's will, backed by the law, must surely be more than a match for Mr. Mason's will. I would rather every fraction of money coming to me was spent than have Brian penniless when he renounces the sea, to say nothing of recovering Mercy's shares."

Mercy, stitching away at some garment for seaside wear, here put in, more timidly than was her wont,

"Shares! I did not know I had anything belonging to me."

"Well, my dear," explained Mrs. Stapleton, "my son left five hundred pounds' worth of railway shares for you in case your relatives did not claim you. Otherwise they would pass to Brian."

"*Did he?* Then he must have been a good man indeed, for

I was nothing to him," and Mercy lapsed into silence, whilst tears of grateful emotion gathered in her large brown eyes and dropped upon her sewing. Presently she asked, with a note of sadness in her voice, "Was not poor Dinah suspected of stealing the will?"

"Yes, my dear, I am sorry to say she was, and I am afraid we went so far as to imagine her a tool in Mr. Mason's hands. It is clear we did them both injustice. We may all take the lesson to heart, and be cautious how we condemn on merely circumstantial evidence in the future," answered Mrs. Stapleton, soberly.

"Aweel," quoth the surgeon, rising to depart, "there was something uncanny about the lassie, an' she was no a'thegether honest, I misdoubt. She was best sent awa'. An' as for Robert Mason——"

"I hope you left full instructions with your successor in case any letters should come from Brian, or even Brian himself?" interrupted the old lady, suddenly. "It would be a terrible shock to him if he could not find us when he landed."

The alarm in her tone and voice communicated itself to the others. The handle of the sewing-machine stopped, and Mercy's needle ran in her finger as both girls started to their feet, affrighted at the bare supposition. The will and all connected with it was for the time being forgotten.

"There's nae reason to be put aboot," said the doctor; "I not only left word with Mr. Adshead, but I saw Jim Dobbs, your old postman, an' I gave him half-a-crown to keep his memory alive. And to make all sure I went to the post-office myself. Neither Brian's letters nor Brian himself will be likely to go astray."

Mr. Forsyth's assurance that he had taken every precaution scarcely sufficed to lay the spectre thus conjured up; doubts lingered in their minds to furnish subject for anxious conversation when the surgeon had taken leave, and to temper their gladness at the discovery of the will.

Mr. Forsyth's own affairs naturally engrossed all his time at this juncture, and left him no leisure to tackle Mr. Mason or even look him up, though he had once more his son Willie at hand to assist. Besides, the will would have to be put in for probate before a claim could be made on anyone. In the interest of all concerned it was considered best not to take any active

step until he could give proper attention to the duties of his executorship.

And so the projected trip to Broadstairs was neither abandoned nor postponed, as had been likely; but as one change involves many, and Willie Forsyth was now claimed by his own family, Mrs. Stapleton was free to take the four young ladies under the shadow of her matronly wing.

Before their preparations were complete, Mr. Forsyth proposed that while he would be seeking for a house in London, Mrs. Forsyth and the younger ones should join the Stapleton party, and Willie run down to prepare the way for them all.

The proposition met with general approval.

"The more the merrier!" said Mrs. Stapleton.

"It will be quite a treat to have someone to meet us with conveyances for ourselves and our luggage, and to have lodgings ready," was Miss Agnew's remark. "The station is a mile or more from Broadstairs, and if it should chance to rain, it is miserable work threading your way down hill and up hill through its intricate streets and alleys in quest of apartments, especially if, as was our case, you happen to be on the wrong side of dinner."

"We shall have nothing of that kind to encounter if Willie Forsyth be our courier," was Hesba's dictum. "He is sure to think of everything and everybody."

"Is he?" cried Mercy. "Then, Hesba, you and he would make a capital pair."

The crimson blood mounted painfully to Hesba's very forehead. "Mercy?" in a tone of questioning rebuke, was all she said; but the young girl, who had intended nothing more than a just tribute to her foster-sister, startled into consciousness, gave piquancy to her former blunder by catching Hesba round the neck and crying out, "Oh, I did not mean *that!* I did not mean *that!*" to the infinite amusement of all present except the young lady concerned.

When, however, the party found conveyances waiting for them and their luggage at the station, and dinner prepared for them at an old-fashioned rambling house designated "Leopold Cottage," wonderfully adapted to their requirements, and within three minutes' walk of the cliffs and harbour, Hesba's panegyric of Willie's thoughtfulness had many seconders; and whether his sister Effie or someone else had or had not reported Mercy's

incautious exclamation, it was apparent that Mr. Willie Forsyth was of Mercy's opinion, and did not care who knew it.

He had suggested that Hesba would find it more exhilarating to walk into the town than be crushed into a crowded fly; and when Mercy volunteered to follow their example, he took care that she had a companion in his sister Effie. And somehow, notwithstanding previous fatigue, the dust of the road, or the heat of the day, Hesba did seem exhilarated by the exercise.

Then no sooner was dinner cleared away than the thoughtful young gentleman prescribed a sofa each on which to stretch the wearied limbs of Mrs. Stapleton and his mother, whilst the rest of the party stretched their unwearied limbs in a voyage of exploration through the labyrinths of the picturesque town and a visit to the not less picturesque jetty, under his pilotage. And Mercy leading a chorus in favour of the jetty, the gallant pilot took possession of Hesba, and led the way from the open space in front of Leopold Cottage down the steep and narrow declivity on their right which did duty for a street, and passing under an old archway (the one antiquity of the place), they were two soon sweeping round the bend of the little harbour to the old wooden jetty, ungallantly careless how the rest of his contingent straggled in the rear.

And so during the too brief period of his three days' stay, whether they traversed the town, the sands, or the cliffs, made the circuit of Bleak House, or searched for sea-anemones on the chalk-strewn beach, he contrived to engross and monopolise Hesba in spite of any remonstrance she might make, which I am afraid was but feeble. Indeed, I've a notion they were apt to stray away from their friends, consciously or unconsciously, and it is certain that before Willie went back to London, whilst Miss Agnew and Mercy (for whom the artist had singular fascination) were sketching the fishing smacks aground in the harbour, Mrs. Stapleton knitting under the shadow of the esplanade wall, Mrs. Forsyth idly watching Effie and Miss Cecilia helping Stuart and Meg to build a fortress of sand for the tide to wash away, he and Hesba had so strayed away beyond the jutting point of cliff which formed the limit of the little bay; and that then and there Willie put to Hesba the momentous question which should decide whether their lives were to be spent together or apart.

They had seldom any dearth of subjects for conversation, those

two; but somehow those *tête-à-tête* saunterings by the sea had not found them over talkative.

What Willie had to say seemed to need much pondering, and elaborate speech, and the need for pondering made him silent; and ruminating on the reasons for Willie's silence did not tend to make Hesba loquacious.

That morning they walked on over the chalk-strewn sands with scarcely a word to break the current of thought or of emotion, the intervals becoming uncomfortably prolonged.

During one of these long pauses a couple of sea-birds flying overhead attracted Hesba's attention, and in watching them she stumbled over a mass of chalk fresh from the cliff above.

It was a wonderful opportunity for her companion.

But for his ready arm she would have had an ugly fall. As it was, he had caught, and did not let her go, for then his loosened tongue was prompt as his arm.

The birds had settled together on a weedy boulder. "You were thinking too much of the birds, Hesba," he said.

"Yes," she admitted, "I was."

"Ah! happy pair of birds," he cried, "and well-mated. I wonder if our thoughts took the same direction. I, too, watched them, Hesba, dearest," and Hesba felt the arm around her tremble as he held her close, "wondering the while if you and Mercy were of one opinion," and he looked in her eyes for the answer.

"One opinion?" she questioned, her eyelids falling, a flush on cheek and brow.

"Yes,—that *we* should make a *capital pair*. I have thought so for many years. What think you?"

She must have thought pretty much the same, or his lips would never have been tolerated so close to hers, or his arm allowed to linger where it did, and she must have been most unaccountably entranced to forget, even for a moment, that the beach whereon they stood was not a world of their own.

At all events, a Ramsgate visitor, marvellously like unto Theobald Capper, taking the undercliff path at low tide, came upon them unawares, and ground his white teeth as he saw them together. And yet, though his shadow trembled at their very feet, they saw it not—they saw not him; they saw only each other in each other's love-lit eyes.

Willie Forsyth went back to his duties with a fresh motive for

perseverance, and was hard at work when a letter from his mother made him aware that Mr. Theobald Capper was haunting Hesba Stapleton's path and was not to be repulsed. The next train brought him back to Broadstairs, and Mr. Capper, who had taken lodgings on the opposite side of the little square, whence he could watch all her movements, after a little bluster thought proper to retire.

"There's as good fish in the sea as ever was caught," was the proverb wherewith he consoled himself, and he went back to his hotel at Ramsgate determined, as he said, to "fly at higher game;" the said higher game being the Hon. Miss Dynevor, who, having caught neither peer nor commoner during her two seasons in Town, had persuaded her mamma that Ramsgate was a not unlikely spot for fishing in matrimonial waters. And having had a very disagreeable experience of high-born poverty, she was rather disposed to forego rank and look out for wealth.

Mr. Theobald Capper, shipbroker, had comported himself as if he had an argosy or two of his own afloat, and being good looking and gentlemanly withal, when he pleased, had been set down by the young lady as among the eligibles, and Mr. Theobald Capper had eyes to see it.

That was a sea-side trip memorable in more respects than one. Towards the close of their visit the weather took a sudden and unfavourable turn. The streets were deluged with rain which turned them into torrents, the sky was blotted out, and heaven's artillery was at war with the wild winds and the waters. After nightfall, when the rain had almost spent itself, a sound went booming over the town which had but one interpretation, and almost on the instant there was the flash of a distant rocket in the sky, and another hollow boom, and a rapid trampling of feet through the square. The cry had gone forth, "A ship on the Goodwins! Man the lifeboat!" and the coxswain lived in a secluded court close by.

Mercy, who had watched the storm from an upper window with vivid interest, and had been with difficulty restrained from braving its severity in her uncontrollable longing to behold the sea in its white wrath, was now not alone in her desire. The master of the house, Willie, Hesba, Miss Agnew, were all ready to witness the launch of the lifeboat; but Mercy dragged Willie down the jetty over which the waves were breaking, and there she stood absorbed, watching the heaving billows for upwards of

an hour, though she had to cling to a rail for support; and was drenched by the dashing spray.

When she left the jetty it was only to take her stand by the Coastguard Station, and there again watch the huge waves come rolling in and wash against the cliff below Bleak House as though they would surmount it, and beaten back in foam and froth, return with yet angrier strides and threatening blows, only to fall again, and again come surging on over the grinding shingle.

Though other hearts beside hers went out to her sailor Brian, no one penetrated the depth of Mercy's secret thoughts. The result was shown months afterwards in an ambitious picture on the wall at South Kensington Museum, with a little ticket in the corner indicating that it had gained a prize for an art-student. But far out of the ordinary category of prizes was the after-gain of that peculiar sea-piece.

CHAPTER XXII.

RESTORATION.

Mr. Forsyth had spoken truly when he said that Robert Mason would keep possession with a grip of iron.

"If, through carelessness, I lost those confounded share certificates," said he, in confidential after-dinner intercourse with Theobald Capper, "and between us both we let Hesba and her property slip from our fingers, I don't mean to part with one shilling that came with my wife, will or no will!" and he set his teeth on the words.

"I don't myself see how you are to avoid it," observed the younger man, as he placed a walnut between a pair of nut-crackers.

A grim smile prefaced the reply. "Don't you, Theo? Well, possession is nine-tenths of the law. They have yet to learn how many thousands of the insurance were due to the captain's heirs. And they will have to prove the validity of the will, for I intend to dispute it. Mrs. Stapleton has no means to carry on a contest, and the longest purse is pretty sure to win the day. I have telegraphed for Crowe."

Mr. Mason himself had something to learn.

Unbusiness-like Frances Stapleton had taken no care of the statement of his indebtedness so tardily rendered by the insinuating shipbroker, and when she left Larch Cottage, a bride, the unheeded sheet of foolscap was found in a work-table drawer, amidst unfinished fragments of crochet, tatting, muslin-work, and such odds and ends. But the finder, business-like Grandma Stapleton, had taken all care of the stray paper, well knowing its value, and not having the other's unbounded faith in Mr. Mason's fatherly love for the orphans.

The sale of Mrs. Stapleton's little freehold had furnished the sinews of war; and, failing its sufficiency, the Liverpool lawyer who had drawn up Captain Stapleton's will had offered to advance a few thousands on the security of the title-deeds of "that bit of property at Birkenhead," if necessary.

And having disputed probate, Robert Mason had to find that the same telegraph wires which summoned, and the railway lines which brought, Septimus Crowe to him, brought also the said lawyer who prepared, the clerks who witnessed, and the furniture-broker who recovered the will, as also from Lloyd's agency a record of the testator's death at sea; and to find, moreover, that the united testimony established the will beyond disputation.

Then he had to learn not only the legal cost of a "frivolous" suit, but the cost of defending the executor's claim for thirteen thousand pounds on behalf of the testator's absent son Brian, and (on behalf of Mercy) for certificates of certain shares lodged in the captain's strong box, which he (Robert Mason) had broken open without legal sanction or proper witnesses, and for which he was consequently responsible.

It was in vain Mr. Mason denied possession, or that Mr. Crowe hunted up and produced in court their vague advertisement for the lost shares. The judge ruled that the advertisement itself proved knowledge of their existence and argued possession, and consequent responsibility.

Robert Mason was ordered to refund and to pay all costs. The case was reported in the newspapers, discussed on 'Change, in the Captain's Room at Lloyd's, in private circles, and the man to whom the aroma of respectability was as the breath of life found himself again in very indifferent odour. In white-faced wrath the black-browed shipowner paced the floor of his splendid drawing-room at Denmark Hill, and neither Septimus Crowe nor Theobald Capper dared venture a word of consolation. Was not the very villa itself imperilled? It would take him years to recover the blow, to make up for the loss!

Of course, Mr. Capper's fortunes had fallen somewhat with those of his uncle. And what though the Hon. Miss Dynevor could see only the exterior, and be captivated therewith, and never read law cases, and was willing to say a very genuine "yes;" the young lady's calculating mamma had an occult faculty for counting up the coin in the pockets of admirers. Consequently the good-looking young shipbroker was shelved—and the Hon. Clara likewise. She had no second offer.

Lady Dynevor had overreached herself. The time came when she would have thought Theobald Capper "quite a catch.'

Lawsuits are anxious burthens, be your cause ever so just, your case ever so clear and perfect; and as the months trod one

upon the heels of another, and the gaining of one trial only paved the way for its successor, anxious hearts assembled in that first-floor sitting-room in North Crescent, where the Stapletons received their friends, and where law was as frequently discussed as physic, whenever James Forsyth or his son Willie dropped in to report progress. And as the love-suit of the latter had progressed to a favourable issue, he was to be found there pretty frequently when the hospital duties of the day were over.

But Mercy being apt to rally the lovers somewhat unmercifully, it followed that Willie carried Hesba off "for a breath of fresh air" to Regent's Park occasionally, or for a quiet stroll round an unfrequented square, where they could expatiate on the present and the future without fear of her observant eye or her caricaturing pencil.

Yet, however love-making might vary the monotony for two lives, it could not altogether stifle the pain and growing anxiety of all for their beloved Brian, of whom nothing could be heard or learned, though months and seasons came and went, and another and another year wore itself away.

The first intelligence came when Mr. Forsyth—his right of executorship established—demanded information from the ship-owners, threatening legal proceedings if withheld. It could then be ascertained that Brian had been put ashore ill at Columbo, not supposed likely to recover.

How this dashed the joy of their first success is scarcely to be told; and how Mercy was affected by the calamitous news is scarcely to be credited, seeing how young she was when he was taken from them, unless we take into account how one name and one idea had been cherished and dwelt upon, the idea that she belonged to Brian if to no one else. She threw up her arms with a shriek, did this girl of fifteen, and rushed from the room to her chamber like one frantic.

Mrs. Stapleton followed, and then Hesba; but their own tears were falling fast, and they could only clasp her in their arms to weep with her.

"Oh, Brian, Brian!" she cried, rocking herself to and fro on her chair, "you said I belonged to you. I belong to nobody now! Oh, that wicked, cruel Mr. Mason! how I hate him!"

She would not listen when Mrs. Stapleton preached forgiveness, and would hardly open her ears to Hesba when she insisted that Brian was *not* dead, had never even been near to death,

or she should have known it by twin sympathy. The assurance brought some little comfort, some hope, but it was slight, and not only Mercy but Mrs. Stapleton began to look upon Brian's return as a blessing to be hoped for, but not expected.

And when the final triumph over Mr. Mason was gleefully announced by the Forsyths, father and son, Mercy's satisfaction was, not that she would no longer be portionless, but that the enemy of Brian had been defeated. She was a tender-hearted creature, would not have hurt a fly; yet I think she would hardly have esteemed any punishment too great for him who had separated Brian from them all.

It had been a busy, anxious, memorable year, but its catalogue of events was not as yet complete.

Little more than a week after the judge pronounced the decision in "Forsyth and Stapleton *v.* Mason," Lady Dynevor and her daughters, in irresistible toilettes, which bore no marks of bygone economy, were strolling leisurely through the galleries of the South Kensington Museum, partly to kill time, and partly to humour a whim of her brother, now Major Sir John Rutherford, he having succeeded to the baronetcy when Sir Edwin succumbed under the gun accident. Sir John was a well-known patron of art, was inclined to foster rising talent, and give a lift to young or struggling genius.

Lady Dynevor laughed in her sleeve at this; but she held that it was better for him to have a harmless hobby than to take a second wife, who would be certain to depose the sister and the nieces. So here she was at his elbow, eye-glass to eye, professing to admire whatsoever Sir John pointed out as worthy of note.

It was during the summer exhibition of students' work from the art-schools, in which Sir John took considerable interest.

She had lingered a moment behind to suggest "a little more attention to your uncle, my dears," when an exclamation from Sir John brought her to his side again.

He was standing with his gaze riveted on a large water-colour drawing on the wall, his breath coming and going in short gasps.

"Look, Ernestine, look!" he ejaculated. "Tell me what you think of that."

With her glass she affected to scan a picture which, at the first glance, shook her almost as it had shaken her brother, and, having examined it leisurely to steady her nerves, she said

critically, "That? A storm; two vessels in danger of collision; an ambitious subject, indifferently treated. The student can never have witnessed a storm at sea; but there is a nice little bit of mountain scenery here," and she made as though she would have drawn him away to a picture farther on.

He did not stir. "Are you blind, Ernestine, or do not you *choose* to see? The artist *has* seen a storm! Has seen *more* than a storm. Lady Dynevor, do not you see a baby face in that bundle blown before the wind, as if from ship to ship? Do you not recognise the yellow-grounded shawl? Oh, *I* can remember the very figure-head of the ship as I saw it by a lightning flash in passing. The *Ariel!* That may be an immature production, but it is no light or common picture, madam. It has been painted with a purpose. The very ship must have been a portrait. My child! my dear child! there is hope for your father yet!"

"Sir John, you are really absurd. Do come away, people are gathering. Can you not look on a pictured storm without making a scene?"

But Sir John only obeyed her behest to convey her ladyship and daughters to their carriage, ere he hastened in agitated search of an official who could throw some light on the subject.

It was a roundabout process; yet before he quitted the building he had ascertained the name of the painter and the art-school in which she was a student.

Stapleton! That was the name of the young ladies he had met at Bloomsbury post-office years before, the very day he went to his dying brother at Rutherford Chase! How his heart beat with hope and expectation! Had he not seen his wife's likeness in the child's face? It *must* be the same.

He had no thought of disappointment as the hansom cab he had hired dashed on with him towards the Queen Square School.

It was closed for the recess. The person left in charge could give no information beyond the address of the head master. Away went the baronet to Highgate. The head master was sketching in South Wales. Once more the wheels were set in motion, once more Sir John alighted at the School-of-Art. He was growing impatient.

Miss Agnew was in the lobby. The housekeeper referred him to her.

Yes, Miss Agnew could inform him; she was Miss Stapleton's

friend; knew the picture; had seen it painted; knew the subject—the story it told. Yes; Miss Mercy Stapleton was the infant blown by the wind on the *Ariel's* deck. The captain and his family had adopted her—it was his name she bore. Captain Stapleton was dead, had been drowned at sea; the family had been exceptionally kind. Glad to welcome the girl's father? Not a doubt of it.

Miss Agnew had earned the inquirer's thanks, and had them. A few minutes later a vigorous hand was on the North Crescent knocker. Major Sir John Rutherford's card was sent up, with a request to see Mrs. Stapleton on important business. Then —not for the first time—grandma regretted that she had no second reception-room, in which to receive a visitor alone.

Major Sir John entered. At one open window in twilight shadow sat Hesba and Willie Forsyth; at the other James Forsyth. Mercy, at the centre table, in a summer dress of blue and white, was busied in lighting the lamp, against which Hesba had protested five minutes previously. Mrs. Stapleton had advanced to receive her visitor.

As the rays of the lamp fell on the face of Mercy, glowing with the excitement of their interrupted conversation, it lighted up the features of the incomer, and revealed, to Hesba and to her, their kind friend of the post-office.

There was a sudden start, and a surprised exclamation. Introduction followed recognition. "You will remember, grandma, the courteous gentleman who enabled me to secure your important letter," said Hesba. The way was cleared for Sir John, who trusted that his errand would excuse his untimely visit.

He had "called about a picture in South Kensington Museum, the representation of a storm in the Bay of Biscay," he said, with emphasis.

All ears were alert; all faces showed open-eyed astonishment.

"In the Bay of Biscay! How did you know *that*, sir?" asked Mrs. Stapleton.

"You forget the label, grandma," put in Mercy.

"Had it not been so described I must have known, madam," he explained, with evident agitation. "As it was, I recognised at once the incident portrayed. That scene is printed on my memory. I stood on the steamer's deck in momentary fear of collision, for I had dear ones on board—and I was a sufferer

by that storm. It was never to be forgotten—the infant torn from the arms of her mother and blown (as we supposed) into the boiling surge to perish."

Mercy clasped her hands together.

"Then you will know my parents, sir!" cried she, eagerly.

It was difficult to restrain his emotion. He took her hand in his. "I do, my child. You may recollect, at the post-office I said you reminded me of my dearest friend. That friend was your dead mother, Blanche Rutherford."

There was a general exclamation—a tear glistened on his bronzed cheek.

"And you?" questioned Mercy, in a gasp.

His lips trembled. "I was the father of the little babe."

"Then you—*you* must be *my father*," gasped Mercy.

"Aye, Blanche, I am," and Mercy, or Blanche, was closely folded in the arms that had not clasped her since she was an infant.

What need was there to produce the written record, the yellow cashmere shawl, the little velvet coat, or to describe so minutely the stolen sleeve-bands, the beads of which were of Gibraltar rock, memorials of the station where the child was born? Identity was already established in all minds. They could but corroborate that which was already assured.

From the moment the picture was pointed out to Lady Dynevor she knew there was no keeping her brother and his child apart. She felt as if her own gaily-painted barque was about to go to pieces.

Dinah was her rock ahead. Let any one of the Stapletons catch a glimpse of her maid, or suppose her only to be so much as named in conjunction with the missing sleeve-bands, recognition and detection would follow. And there would be no keeping back the fact that *she* had seen them and knew whence and how they had been obtained.

It would be utter ruin; blight her children's prospects. Her generous brother would cast them all adrift. She would have to fly from England in poverty and disgrace!

She felt as if the horses were trampling upon her instead of the stony pavement during that drive home from the Kensington Museum. Her mind was on the rack, yet she had to preserve her composure before her daughters. It was only to be done by affected fatigue and—silence.

Should she bribe Dinah to silence? Nay, that would place her under a menial's foot. So far she had kept Dinah under hers. And it must be so still. Should she give her a hint that the thief was tracked, or dismiss her summarily? It did not take the lady long to decide where her own interests were at stake.

Never was Lady Dynevor so little disposed to be amiable over her toilette, or to tolerate the airs of her maid. And when Lady Dynevor was out of temper, she was apt to carry things with a high hand.

When Major Sir John Rutherford put in an appearance late at night, brimful of joy and gladness, Lady Dynevor and her daughters were gone to a ball, and Dinah was gone—no one knew whither; peremptorily dismissed at a moment's notice. Yet that did not trouble Sir John; the connection between a little nurse-maid and the full-blown lady's maid did not occur to him. He had no interest in Lady Dynevor's servants, or her caprices with respect to them.

Yes, that clever diplomatist, Lady Dynevor, had got rid of Dinah Smart and her damaging secret before Sir John Rutherford could come in flushed with excitement to announce the glad discovery of his long-lost daughter and heiress, and being from home, she contrived to postpone explanations until morning, when she trusted the abrupt dismissal of her maid for insolence would account for any perturbation or chagrin she might be unable to restrain, with the sudden deposition of herself, her son, and her daughters before her. Morning found my lady fully prepared to go into languid ecstasies of surprise and delight at the prospect of embracing her long-lost niece, and to bespeak the gratuitous affection of her own darlings for the cousin they had not yet beheld.

She certainly acted her part to perfection—but no telegraphy of foot or eye could inspire her daughters with an enthusiasm they did not feel. The revelation to them was crushing; and their congratulations were anything but warm.

Poor girls, thought Sir John, who saw their discomfiture. My joy is a blow to them. But I must not let them feel it. I must portion them both off.

A word or two from their lady mother brought wisdom akin to her own; and she was all eagerness to behold her long-lost niece; dear Blanche's baby girl.

And having, "for the sake of her dear brother, overcome her repugnance to plebeian associations" so far as to bear him company to North Crescent, and submit to an introduction to "people of inferior grade," she was equally prepared on her return to her own aristocratic quarters (without the dreaded incumbrance) to congratulate that brother alike on his daughter's loveliness and on having a sister at hand willing to immure herself and *her* daughters at Rutherford Chase until Mercy Stapleton's inevitable want of culture should be remedied, and Blanche Rutherford rendered presentable to "society" under her distinguished chaperonage.

CHAPTER XXIII.

LEFT TO PERISH.

MESSRS. SPARLING AND GROVE, shipowners, of Water Street, Liverpool, kept themselves, as men of business, pretty well posted up in the movements of their correspondent, the sometime ship-broker of Castle Street, now of Finch Lane, London; and did not need telling that Captain Stapleton's will had been found and established. They had taken measures to obtain a fuller report of the trial than found its way into newspapers, and had come to the conclusion that the speckless gentleman had thrown dust into their eyes all along, and that the rumours floating about Liverpool, prior to his removal, must have had more foundation than they had been willing to admit. "His dealings with *us* have always been fair and honourable," said Sparling to Grove prior to the trial, "and we must speak of a man as we find him."

So, too, they said of him to James Forsyth when he sent in his card, and required authoritatively to know what had become of his godson, Brian Stapleton, whose term of apprenticeship had expired.

But they never disputed the right of Captain Stapleton's executor to make the inquiry; and were ready to apologise for the reception of young Mr. Forsyth when he had called upon them for Mr. Mason's address. And they did so most fully, assuring their visitor that they had been atrociously misled, both with respect to his son and Brian Stapleton.

"Indeed, sir," explained Mr. Sparling, "Mr. Mason represented that one motive for quitting Liverpool was to remove his stepdaughter from the persecution of your son, who was an abandoned young reprobate; the one, in fact, who had led his stepson astray, and made his shipment to sea a necessity."

"An' I suppose ye never once misdooted him," quoth James Forsyth, offering his snuff-box to the partners before he took a pinch himself.

"Never, sir," answered Mr. Grove. "Mr. Mason's dealings

with us had been marked with the strictest integrity. We had no reason to question his word. We thought his honour unimpeachable."

"Yet there were some queer rumours afloat before the impeccable gentleman left Leeverpool," put in James Forsyth, drily.

"Yes, sir," replied the elder partner, "and we, as in honour bound to a man who had, as we supposed, dealt fairly by us, contradicted those reports point blank, for the very credit of the shipping interest. Moreover, we were led to understand that you and your son had set them afloat from interested motives."

"Aweel, gentlemen, I never hesitated to speak my mind pretty freely aboot Robert Mason, but it wasna in the highways an' byways. It was face to face wi the man himsel, or in private wi those most concairned."

"Well, sir, we had a most thorough belief in Mr. Mason, a belief only shaken by the issue of the late trial. And for the honour of our firm and of Liverpool we are ready to make all amends in our power," said Mr. Sparling, in the tone of one confessing a repented error.

And what did these amends amount to beyond supplying an extract from Captain Lever's log-book: "Put Brian Stapleton ashore at Columbo, at his own request, six weeks after expiration of his apprenticeship. Bad with scurvy and dysentery; not likely to recover. Left him his kit and a month's wages. Had been no use for a fortnight, skulking long before."

They certainly promised to have inquiries made by the next vessel they chartered to Ceylon, and to acquaint Mr. Forsyth with the result; but they were not sanguine as to results.

"We need not tell you, sir, as a medical gentleman, that a man's death warrant is as good as signed who has two such diseases so close to the equator."

"Yes, sirs, when left to perish by inhuman brutes, as that young man has been," was James Forsyth's answer as he quitted their office.

And James Forsyth was nearer to the truth with his guess than Captain Lever's log in its report.

It was not at his own request that Brian Stapleton was put ashore. He was too ill to make such request. His mind had wandered, and he might have babbled of cooling streams, and shadowy trees, and home delights; at all events, Radford, the

brute of a mate, had so translated his maundering to the captain, and the indentures being already cancelled, the captain was as ready as his officer to get rid of the young fellow, nothing doubting that they should so earn the thanks of his stepfather.

It was not unknown to them that Brian had been within an ace of shipment with the notorious Captain Mawson in the *Regia;* and it had been the keynote to the tune they had piped for him aboard the *Dolphin* from the time he first set foot on her deck to that morning in August when she was brought to an anchorage in the roadstead over which the tall lighthouse and the batteries of Columbo kept watch and ward.

There was no harbourage at Columbo for large dhonies or any other vessels of more than a hundred tons burthen; at least a shifting bar of sand across the mouth of the little land-locked bay prohibited entrance, but the outer road was safe from October to the end of March during the north-east monsoon. At other times, when the wind blew landwards, it was not wise to anchor too near; a perilous reef, known as "The Drunkard's Rocks," having brought many a venturous skipper into trouble.

The rocky headland on which lighthouse and fort were built was almost isolated from the mainland, but a wooden quay ran along to enable boats and small vessels to land passengers and cargo; and at all hours, save mid-day, the harbour and all around it was full of life and motion.

Before the *Dolphin* had well come to an anchorage, canoes and boats filled with dark-skinned natives—Singhalese, Malabars, Moors—were alongside, some with cocoanuts, mangoes, pine-apples, oranges, pomegranates; some with poultry, including turkeys and pea-fowl; others with vegetables, or arrack and toddy. Then there were merchants and traders, European as well as Singhalese, and the noise on deck, no less than a sick man's longing to look on the land, with its green fringe of cocoa palms, brought Brian crawling up from his berth, only to sink down on the deck, and be there saluted with a kick and a curse, and told to get out of the way, and that if he was so fond of the land he might go ashore and stop there.

"I should not mind that," was all Brian said; but it was reported to Captain Lever as a desire to be put ashore; and he, not caring to be longer troubled with the useless invalid, gave a ready assent, as he stepped over the vessel's side into a boat bound for the harbour.

Lying on deck, with his languid eyes turned landward, his gaze was fixed on the distant mountains, where Adam's Peak lifted a cloud-capped head of more hoary antiquity than Ararat. But he thought nothing of its legend or history, content to lie there breathing the perfumed aroma wafted across the wave from "balmy groves and bowers of spice," and listening to the cool plash of oars in a sort of hazy dream, in which he recalled the time of his first memorable visit to Columbo, after the cyclone had played havoc with the *Ariel's* spars and rigging, and some refitting was needed. Rough enough was his recall from the past to the present.

"You lazy vagabond you! go below, and overhaul your kit. You have to be ready to go ashore with it when cap'n comes aboard, so you'd best look lively. We want no shirking lubbers here!" As usual, the polite first mate punctuated his order with a kick, and seasoned it with a spice of choice blasphemy.

Brian knew what it meant. He had seen invalid or rebellious seamen put ashore on savage and barren islands before then; and as he answered, "Aye, aye, sir," without remonstrance, he hardly knew whether to be more glad or sorry.

The *Dolphin* was homeward bound; the five years of his apprenticeship were gone; he had been looking forward with feverish longing to his release from the hard bondage and the miseries of a sea-faring life, such as it had been to him, and to his restoration to the dear friends from whom he had been so cruelly torn. But he had been so knocked about, so overworked whilst in health; nay, when scarcely able to stand without support, had been sent up the rigging to reef and unreef sails, and been saluted with oaths and a rope's end when he missed the reefs or was less active at the duty, his very allowance of lime-juice having been stopped as a punishment for some imaginary offence; so that the gruff announcement of the mate fell pointless on his ear.

More than once he had been told "the sharks were waiting for his carcase."

A wan smile flitted across his face as he went below at the mate's bidding, and thought, "Well, I shall disappoint the sharks if I die ashore; better be buried in the earth, under some glorious palm or camphor tree, than be flung out to them, and I cannot be more lonely or desolate than I am here."

The swish of oars was heard alongside; he took a hasty farewell of his fellow-sailors, two or three of whom gave him their tarry hands as if afraid to be called to account afterwards. Captain Lever came aboard; a small sum of money, which he was told, in the hearing of the crew, was the wages due to him, was put into his hand, and he was ordered to follow his kit, then being lowered into the boat. He was pulled to the jetty, landed, and left there sitting on his sea-chest, with no more ceremony or compunction than if he had been a log of wood.

Perhaps less, for Brian, holding fast by the memory of his dead mother, and by the precious Bible which had been, as it were, a sacred legacy from her, had preserved his reverence for the Holy Name so lightly profaned alike by officers and crew. If he said nothing he shuddered at the ribald jests and coarse language around him; and whether his silence was construed into reproof or not, it certainly made him a mark for ridicule, and something stronger.

But he bravely kept his own course; not that he held his cheek to the smiter. He made his own hand keep his own head when he had a chance. But he thrust himself into no quarrels, obeyed orders without questioning; and if he held himself somewhat aloof, it was that he kept an ultimate end before him, and that was *not* the sea. At all events, there was no fellowship between himself and the associates with whom he had been levelled, and the more dissolute of these would not be sorry to be well quit of him.

It may be that he had been the better enabled to preserve his self-respect by two amulets which he carried about with him—Hesba's locket, with the intertwined braid of her own and Mercy's and his mother's hair; and the thread-and-needle case of Mercy's stitchery in which he had found a sunny curl secreted by herself. The ribbon guard had long worn away, and a bit of string alone secured them; but they lay upon his breast, reminders of all he had lost, all he hoped to regain unless he lost himself.

But as he sat there, ill, helpless, deserted on the quay of Columbo, his head sank in his hands, and in the listless inertia of disease he well-nigh gave [illegible].

For more than an hour he [illegible] under the grateful shade of one of the yellow-blossom[illegible]lip trees which surround the jetty, amid all the stir and bustle of a great commercial emporium, the coming and going of coolies and bullock carts, the loading

and unloading of merchandise, rice, coffee, oil, and cinnamon; gazing out on the odd-looking native vessels and boats which thronged the harbour, cargo-laden to or from the ships in the roadstead, almost unconscious of anything but a sense of repose in the midst of activity, to which the monotonous chant of oarsmen tended to contribute.

He had sat there long enough to attract attention, and more than one brown coolie, with his comboy tucked up between his legs, had touched him on the shoulder and pointed to the chest and to the European-looking buildings around the harbour; but still he sat there.

At length he was roused by a jabbering of tongues, and an English voice amongst them.

Can any one explain that mysterious influence one individual has upon another causing them to think each upon each other at the same moment, though leagues of land and sea may intervene? that act of thought which heralds the coming letter, the footstep on the threshold? It cannot be volition, for it is wholly independent of the will, and is too eccentric for calculation.

In all Ceylon there was but one man with whom Brian could claim acquaintance. He was an old Liverpool friend of his father's, who had settled in the island many years before, during the speculative mania for coffee planting, and had not been among the many losers. With Mr. Calvert Captain Stapleton had traded, and it was at his residence near Columbo that Mrs. Stapleton, Brian, and Mercy had found an agreeable home during the stay of the *Ariel* in the roadstead. Once only had Brian seen the coffee planter since then, though he had been at Columbo twice or thrice, and it was but for a brief half-hour, whilst waiting on the jetty for Captain Lever.

"You wait here, Stapleton!" the captain had sung out. The name had caught Mr. Calvert's ear, as did the voice which answered, "Aye, aye, sir." He looked at Brian, and Brian looked at him, and the light of recognition which broke over the young man's face did the rest. The man had changed less than the boy, but the boy had developed into a duplicate of his father, as Mr. Calvert had known him first. There were many questions to be asked and answered, and fain would the coffee-planter have carried the youth home with him then, but Brian knew that it would be fruitless to ask leave. And so they shook hands and parted.

Sitting there on his sea-chest, with a sense of freedom and of desolation contending for the mastery, so far as disease had left him capable of mental effort; and just as he had begun to wonder where he should find a shelter, and how far his small means would go, a vision of Mr. Calvert seemed to arise before him; and in a sort of dreamy mist he wondered whether the rich planter was alive or dead, or whether it would be right in his condition to throw himself upon the hospitality of a man he had scarcely known since his boyhood.

It was on these dreamy musings the jabbering voices broke, though it is doubtful whether they would have disturbed him had he not heard a clear English voice utter the words, "Stapleton—Brig *Dolphin!*" in a tone of incredulous wonder as if read out from the inscription on his chest.

Ere he could turn round a kind hand was laid on his shoulder; the one man of whom he had been thinking, the one only man in all Ceylon of whom he had any knowledge, was standing there before him.

Brian made an effort to rise and sank back; but he put out his thin hand, and whilst a feeble smile lit up his face, murmured apologetically, "Excuse me rising, Mr. Calvert; I am not well."

The other seemed puzzled. One of the coolies of the quay apparently volunteered some information in Singhalese, for Mr. Calvert, who still held Brian's hand in his warm clasp, exclaimed,

"What! put him ashore, and left him alone on the quay; a man too ill to take care of himself! They could never have sailed away unless they expected friends to meet him. It must be so," he said half to himself; then to Brian, "Mr. Stapleton, you have friends in Columbo?"

"Not a soul but yourself," gasped Brian. "I would like—to get some lodgings—some hospi—— "

"Poor fellow," muttered the planter to himself; "what a lucky thing I came down to the Fort about those ill-picked berries!" (Part of the Fort was utilized as coffee stores.) "Don't trouble yourself, my good fellow." (Brian had made a second attempt to rise.) "You shall be taken care of for the sake of old times and the old town."

Brian's inarticulate thanks were drowned in the louder orders issued in Singhalese to a scantily-attired coolie, and presently

a palanquin was on the spot, and one of the island's small saddle-horses.

A couple of coolies assisted Brian into the luxurious palanquin. His sea-chest was quickly corded with coir-ropes, and slung on a pingo between two other dark-skinned coolies, whose expansive turbans might have used up so much calico there had been quite an inconsiderable remnant left to drape the limbs. There was a moment to replace the betel which had stained their teeth darker than their skins, during which Mr. Calvert mounted, and then the palanquin was lifted and the cavalcade in motion.

It was time, for it was close on six o'clock, and already the lamps along the quay, and under the verandahs and in the stores and shops, shone like stars along the sweeping line of tulip-trees, and night was looking down.

CHAPTER XXIV.

HELP AT HAND.

The swinging motion of the palanquin was not unpleasant. The evening breeze fresh from the sea was cool and refreshing. Brian's capacity for thought or self-exertion was gone. He had a consciousness that he had fallen into kind hands, and neither asked nor cared whither he was being borne.

But speedily, before the semi-European buildings around the harbour had been well left behind, there was an abrupt stoppage, and presently after a hum of voices in his ear. There was a doctor by the side of the palanquin, the light of a cocoanut lamp shone in Brian's face, his pulse was felt, a few questions were asked, the doctor retired, and after a while re-appeared with a draught for the sailor to swallow. There was more conversation, of which he only caught the words, "Much care," and "Early in the morning," and they were again in motion.

Whether the draught had done its reinvigorating work, or a stinging mosquito had done his as effectually, Brian was roused to the consciousness that they were journeying along an open road across a treeless plain, where horsemen were riding to and fro, and gay palanquins, with jewelled fair ones inside, dotted the grassy waste, or left it for the road; and that there were promenaders on foot almost as numerous. By the light of many lamps, the moving scene, with all its variety of costume, and colour, and race impressed itself upon his mind as a something known of old.

"I seem to recollect this place," he remarked faintly to Mr. Calvert, who rode beside the palanquin, "and its name——"

"Of course you remember! Did you not come here with your mamma? and did not that little child you had picked up at sea quarrel with my little one about you, and push her out of the palanquin? Or stay, was it not Anita pushed the other out? It is the Galle Face, man; the fashionable resort; the very Hyde Park of Columbo!"

"Ah!" said Brian, "I remember;" but he knew nothing of Hyde Park, and so the simile was lost; but his mind had flown

back to Mercy and the bygone time, and he was sufficiently himself to say, "I hope your little girl is well?"

"Little! none so little. The young baggage is old enough to be thinking of sweethearts!"

"Sweethearts!" Brian had lost count of time.

"Yes, there was a dark tinge of Portuguese blood in the veins of my wife; and you forget that maidens in the tropics marry before an English lass has left the schoolroom. But you will see Anita when we reach Colpetty. You remember the Colpetty road, do you not?"

Brian, exhausted, lay back to think. They had entered a very grove of cocoanut trees, and as Mr. Calvert held forth on the excellence of the direct high road, so shaded, which ran the whole of the seventy miles onward to Galle, he watched the crows descending to their nests in the tall trees, undisturbed by the lamps which dotted the road, and made in the distance two meeting lines of light. He saw the handsome verandah-shaded houses, and felt the oppressive perfume of champac, jessamine, and other odorous flowers in their cultivated compounds, and it needed nothing more to remind him of the interminable road on which so many of Columba's merchants and government officials had their homes. It needed not the busy gaps filled in with native shops, and outdoor cookery not so pleasantly perfumed, to bring it all to mind.

He remembered the very compound at which they stopped; the three verandahs one overshadowing another; the windows, where venetian blinds and gauzy mats did duty for windows; the square-tiled floors and cool matting; the richly-carved ebony furniture; but he had no remembrance of the olive-tinted face, or the lustrous dark eyes which looked down on him so pitifully, when Mr. Calvert said, "Anita, I have brought a handsome young Englishman home with me to be taken care of and kept in the land of the living. He is an old friend of yours, the son of a much older friend of mine."

Nor did Anita seem to remember either her friend or the father he so much resembled. Years obliterate features in the young. But when her father said pleasantly, "I hope you'll not quarrel *this* time," she put forth a soft hand sparkling with gems and said, "It must be Bri—Mr. Stapleton! And how is the little child—Mercy I think you called her?"

Brian's languid eyes expanded wide. "What! Miss Calvert, have you remembered us all these years?"

She explained—"You were the first little English boy I had seen. Then you came from Liverpool, my father's birthplace; and my poor mamma when she was dying talked of Mrs. Stapleton and you all so much, I was not likely to forget altogether."

The seven o'clock dinner had been long waiting—and Brian had been long fasting; but ill though he was, he felt the incongruity of his tarry suit with the elegance of oriental luxury and wealth around him.

His kind host, however, checked all attempt at apology. "Never mind, my young friend; dinner is the word now, not dress. My Singhalese cook is a capital one to cater for a sick palate. You must try to eat now. The fresh rig-out can come after the doctor and the medicine to-morrow."

Brian would have spoken.

"Now, not a word of thanks. I owe more to Captain Stapleton than I can ever repay to his son."

Whatever might be the nature of the coffee-planter's indebtedness to Captain Stapleton, certain it is Brian had the benefit of his gratitude. If he did not sleep that night it was not for the lack of a cool couch, or mosquito curtains, or a kind "good-night," or skilfully-compounded medicaments. But he was ill, seriously ill, and the doctor, who saw him in the morning, gave no hope of his immediate recovery.

Mr. Calvert's son, who managed the plantation and lived upon it, shook his head and said the young man would never see England again.

But Talipa, Miss Calvert's Singhalese attendant, who had been her mother's nurse, muttered, "Much him know," and devoted herself to prove her young master no prophet.

And Miss Calvert herself, as in duty bound by her father's wish, devoted herself to the like end.

Yet it was a very sorry apology for a skeleton that was handed into the palanquin to take the air on Galle Face at the end of three months. And it was scarcely the old Brian who a month later sat out under the verandah in a gentleman's light attire with Mr. Calvert, and talked so coolly of "working his passage home."

"We'll talk of that a month hence," said Mr. Calvert, rising

in some heat, and flinging away his half-burnt cigar as if not too well pleased.

But it was quite the old Brian whose independence chafed against leading a luxurious life of indolence under the roof of another, and it was quite the old Brian who sent letter after letter home to his sister and to his grandmother to calm their apprehensions, and tell with gratitude how kind had been the friends he had found, and how true he was to all home ties.

And it was quite the old Brian who bravely put temptation behind him and kept not only Hesba's locket but Mercy's curl next to his heart, and spoke so openly of his love for his twin sister and the orphan who had been his boyish playmate, to whom he was in honour and affection bound, when he found the colour rising to his brow under the fervid glances of Anita's passionful black eyes; and felt that the Portuguese love songs she sang to him were like to warp his faith and honour with their seductive sweetness. For had he not in his voyaging picked up enough of the language to be his own interpreter, the glowing beauty's every look and tone would have conveyed their meaning.

Brian had need of his two amulets, and he knew it. He felt that he was in danger. There was witchery in all those tender glances, those soft tones, those little gifts of flowers (whose more subtle meaning was lost to him), those numberless small attentions the rich planter's daughter paid to him who had been kicked and cuffed as a vagabond so long, and who for five long years had scarcely known the gentle touch of a woman's hand.

Yes, Anita Calvert had opened the large gates of her heart in compassion for the sick and solitary sailor, and love for the handsome young Englishman had stolen in and taken sure possession. An English girl would have wrapped herself round in a veil of delicate reticence. With Anita there was scarcely a film of disguise. It was as transparent as the gauzy robes she wore; and not shown alone in lingering touch and word, but in the fiery flash of jealousy when Mercy's name was brought to the front, and she knew there was no responsive echo to the beating of her own wild heart.

As there was no disguise, so there could be no mistake. Brian's own sense of honour and delicacy took the alarm. He was there, a mere trespasser on the bounty and hospitality

of his father's friend, a man of wealth and position, whilst he had not a pound he could call his own. It was not for him to seek the planter's daughter for a wife in any case; it was not for him to encourage a passion which would frustrate all Mr. Calvert's plans, and work so much disaster.

Had he not heard of and seen Mr. Pereira, the young merchant of Portuguese extraction who had been Anita's favoured lover before he was set ashore to come between them? And had he not seen the lowering brows, the angry glances, the dark young merchant cast on him, his supposed rival?

The intoxicating draught of a woman's homage was almost at Brian's lip before he knew its nature, or had strength to set it aside.

Then, when he discovered the danger of being left for hours to feel the witchery of bright eyes, with all the accessories of subdued light, warm air, brightly-tinted draperies, and flowers whose fragrance was inhaled with every breath, he stole away from the curtained rooms, where there was only Talipa in attendance, to the verandah, or the shade of the yellow champac and palms in the compound; until one day he set his foot upon a small snake, and but for his ready knife and the fact that its head was beneath his foot had been a dead man.

He then took to strolling along the shady road beneath the cocoanut trees, and then begged to join Mr. Calvert in his journeys to and from Columbo, or to his coffee plantation which lay among the hills off the steep highway to Newarra-Ellia.

His "restlessness," his "desire to be up and doing," were at first the reasons urged, and more than once he mooted the subject of his return home, but always to the annoyance of his kind host.

There was no way of making Anita understand him but this; and he could not say to Mr. Calvert that he was flying from the smiles of his too-enchanting daughter. She knew it was so; but the father saw only the eagerness of the active man to throw off the inertia of illness and luxury.

It was well for Mr. Calvert that Brian had become his companion out of doors. Sailors proverbially are bad horsemen; but Brian had learned to ride on Willie Forsyth's pony when quite a boy, and there was no fear of his falling off a Singhalese horse, going at a Singhalese pace.

The only railway was a new one between Columbo and Kandy.

Thanks to a spirited British Governor, whose name—Sir R. Barnes—deserves to be perpetuated, a thorough network of roads traverses the island, and rest-houses, bearing some resemblance to the old Arabian caravanserai, may be found every fifteen or twenty miles. Many of these on unfrequented roads are now falling to decay; at certain seasons some are so infested with ants, leeches, and such blood-sucking tenants, that travellers at times prefer to take their siesta in the road. Nay, wild beasts from the jungle have taken quarters in them ere now. Only in the cool of morning and evening is travelling possible, and seldom are more than fifteen miles covered in a day. And it is needful to carry your own provisions, or to have them carried by coolies, or you are likely to fast by the way.

Part of the road from Mr. Calvert's suburban villa at Colpetty to his plantation between Rambodde and Newarra-Ellia, lay through a lovely valley, beautiful alike by day or moonlit night, where many mountain streams made melody, and were suggestively cool. The rising valley ended at Rambodde rest-house, where the mountains rose abruptly above, and two cataracts went tumbling down below with deafening noise.

Here Mr. Calvert and Brian dismounted, for the sun was hot and high.

An attendant took the reins, but the weary beasts, who ought to have been thankful for shade and shelter, seemed to sniff the air uncomfortably, as if ill at ease. Mr. Calvert led the way indoors, the coolies following with their laden pingoes to prepare a meal of rice and fowl and curry whilst the gentlemen took their repose. The room into which Mr. Calvert advanced was bare enough in the matter of furniture, but its brick floor was comparatively cool, and there were at least a couple of bedsteads, a few chairs, and a table. He stepped lazily across the floor without observing that the room had already a sleeping occupant their entrance must have roused.

A low growl, a pair of gleaming eyes in a dusky corner, made Brian first aware that there a leopard crouched, making ready for a spring. In an instant Brian had flung himself between Mr. Calvert and the crouching beast, and knife in hand stood watching him. For a moment the animal drew back cowed by the steadfast eyes; but seeing no opening for retreat, sprang forward with a force which sent Brian backwards

to the ground with the beast above him; but his knife was already in its throat. Arrested for the instant, it yelled with savage pain, and ere it could fix its infuriated fangs in its prostrate antagonist, the sharp knife had made another plunge. Mr. Calvert turned sharply round, and in another moment had drawn his revolver and sent a shot through the animal's brain. It fell heavily with Brian underneath him.

The noise and the shot brought the rest-house keeper and the coolies on the scene, only to pause in the doorway, affrightèd. Reassured by the stillness of the heavy beast, they rushed forward and Brian was speedily released.

"You were sharp, my lad," said Mr. Calvert. "Had your eyes and your limbs not been quicker than mine, I had been in queer condition now. Not much use would my revolver have been if the great brute had sprung on me from behind. It is well you keep that sailor's knife of yours handy; odd as it looks to a landsman. We may cry quits now, Stapleton; a life for a life."

He stopped short as Brian staggered to his seat and asked for water. He was deluged with blood; how could it be otherwise?

"My dear fellow," he then cried, with concern, "you seem faint; surely you are not hurt?"

"A scratch or two," was the answer, but the white face belied the brave words.

The blood of man and beast had flowed together. Brian's chest was crushed and torn; his left arm frightfully lacerated; done with the great claws in the first spring.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE END OF HOPE!

One of the coolies ran off without a word and speedily returned with some vegetable styptic he had gathered, or Brian would have bled to death, and never a word have been known to kith or kin.

It was well, too, that they were within so few miles of Mr. Calvert's plantation, and that there was medical aid within reach at Newarra-Ellia, for Brian's wounds were deep and dangerous, doubly so in so hot a climate, however salubrious the island may be considered for its situation.

Yet be sure that he who had flung himself in the path of the springing leopard to protect his own protector lacked for neither care nor attention.

It was long before the English doctor from Newarra pronounced Brian fit for removal; and then Mr. Calvert could not comprehend why he should prefer to remain with his son on the plantation instead of returning with him to Colpetty, to be once more nursed to health by Talipa and Anita.

Brian pleaded the purer and cooler air among the mountains, and Newarra-Ellia being in so good repute as a sanatorium, there was no gainsaying the plea.

But when the time came that the young man was strong and well again, and began once more to urge the necessity for his return to England, the coffee-planter did his uttermost to induce him to remain in Ceylon.

Under the pretence of indebtedness to Captain Stapleton, he had provided his son alike with clothes and cash; now he offered his interest to obtain him an official appointment. And when Brian negatived this on the ground of unfitness and lost education (though he had picked up somewhat from the good planter's library at Colpetty), made him a different offer this time of a lucrative post in the shipping department of his Columbo coffee-store, if he would but stay.

No doubt had there been no other and earlier claims on Brian Stapleton, he would have stayed and taken all the good that was

so kindly pressed upon him. But no letters had come in answer to his, and he became more and more apprehensive and restless as the days went by.

In the early time of his convalescence he had strayed from the mountain-side plantation away by the winding Marvillaganga to the grassy plain where the houses of Newarra-Ellia lay amongst crimson-flowered rhododendrons, a lovely picture with the wooded mountains for a frame. And wandering on the glistening banks of the shining river, he picked up now and then from the sparkling sands a deep red bit of stone with a fiery gleam, just as he had picked up shells on the sea-shore for far-away Mercy of old.

That they had more value than the sparkle which would please a child he had never a suspicion; he just put them away for Mercy in lieu of more valuable gifts. And it is singular what a confusion there was in his mind respecting *her*. He remembered her as the schoolgirl with bag and books, her paints and pencils; but there were other times when he added years to her age, and wondered if she had grown as womanly as Anita; and pondering what had become of her and Hesba, as they never wrote, he spoke to Mr. Calvert once again on his next visit to the plantation.

"My good kind friend," said he, "I am leading here a perfectly useless life; living, too, on your generosity, and it does not become me as a man to loiter here in idleness. It is imperative that I should find a homeward-bound ship as speedily as may be."

They were standing under the verandah at the time, looking out over a mass of glossy green coffee plants, where a tribe of betel-chewing natives were gathering the ripe berries, Mr. Calvert leaning against one of the wooden pillars, a cigar in his mouth, Brian resting against another, his left foot on the stone socket (in which the wooden posts were sunk as a protection against white ants), his arm on the raised knee.

As he spoke Mr. Calvert stood upright, came forward and rested his hand on the young man's shoulder.

"Brian Stapleton," said he, gravely, "your father saved me from ruin. I owe my fortune mainly to his intervention at a crisis. *You* have saved my life, and what will not a man give in exchange for his life? Is there absolutely *nothing* I can give to tempt you to remain with us?"

"Nothing, Mr. Calvert, nothing; and I do not say this without the fullest appreciation of your overpowering kindness, but honour forbids me to linger here, and my sisters have claims upon me not to be set aside."

Mr. Calvert looked Brian steadily in the eyes, and he thought he saw a crimson flush rising to his temples.

"Is that your only reason?" he asked, seriously. "Is that the reason why you have chosen to linger in this isolated spot and shun the home at Colpetty, the moonlight rides on the Galle Face, the society of a warm-hearted girl? Did you think it was not honourable to woo the rich man's daughter? Brian, there is *nothing* I would withhold from you, not even Anita."

Brian started, and now the crimson spread and deepened, and beaded drops hung on his brow. It was a critical moment. Wealth, beauty, love were offered him. He had only to say the word and they were his. Only to accept luxury in lieu of hardship and uncertainty; only to gratify the best of benefactors;—only to abjure those who seemed to have forgotten *him*.

He did not answer. In agitation he thrust his hand into his hair, then into his breast. It came in contact with the locket and thread-case now stained with his own life-blood!

That steadied him. Abjure them! Never! Forget him! The thought was treason.

He turned towards his kind friend. Agitation choked his utterance. "Mr. Calvert, your generosity has overpowered me. I am at a loss for words—I—I know not how to reply without appearing basely ungrateful. It is true I fled from your luxurious home in which I might have perchance forgotten myself and others; but to those others I am alike in love, in honour, and in duty bound. And pardon me, sir, if I suggest that Miss Calvert has an adorer in Mr. Pereira, in all respects more suited to mate with your daughter than the poor sailor you picked up half dead on Columbo jetty."

For some time Mr. Calvert was silent. It was not pleasant to feel that he had offered his daughter to a penniless man and had had the offer rejected. The reminder of Mr. Pereira was well timed. He affected to have spoken without any knowledge of Anita's predilections, and to turn the matter off lightly, but it was not done with ease.

"Ah, well, Mr. Stapleton, perhaps you are right; I have seen the young fellow hanging about Anita a long while, and who knows but the Portuguese element in both may best assimilate. I might only awake jealousy and discord did I introduce an English rival; though, believe me, my good will towards you remains unchanged."

No more was said of Anita. No more opposition was raised to his departure. Mr. Calvert's son, the staunch friend of young Pereira, did not disguise his satisfaction. Of Anita's passionate emotion, her outburst of violent grief, he heard nothing. But he knew that, like the thunderstorms of the climate, they spent themselves, and only cleared the sky. He was not so vain as to fear any very deep-seated anguish at his loss.

Brian went back with Mr. Calvert; but they rode on to Columbo, without any stoppage for leave-taking at Colpetty. In a few days there was a homeward-bound ship in the offing, and in spite of Mr. Calvert's wish to pay his passage money, Brian declared that idleness was not good for him, and he was soon rated on the ship's books as an able-bodied seaman; his kit being sent aboard for him.

Father and son, with whom everything had not run altogether smoothly, might have parted as Brian and his father's friend parted on the deck of the *Dotterel;* there was mutual affection, reluctance to part, and yet there was a sort of restraint over both. How could it be otherwise?

It was a healthy change for Brian from the inactivity of a shore life amongst luxurious surroundings, with servants and coolies ready to perform his lightest bidding; luxurious ease to which prostrating illness had been the leader—and active life on ship board with an ordinary seaman's duties, an ordinary seaman's rations; and if he found something of hardship in it for the first few days, the feeling wore off, and he was as brisk and alert as ever a sailor on board.

He had an impression that Mr. Calvert's influence had been at work, for certainly during the first week no strain was put upon his newly-gathered strength; after that he took his turn at the watch, and shared the ordinary duties of the crew as one of themselves.

Never was a ship better manned, handled, or disciplined. Captain Grey was kind but firm. Not one of the old type of

hard drinkers and hard swearers, he set an example of sobriety and good manners to his crew which was not without its effect.

It was a new experience to Brian, and certainly a pleasant one.

They had rough weather for entering the Straits of Babelmandeb; were beaten about and had a narrow escape of shipwreck, during which Brian had a heavy fall from the rigging; but they managed to clear the dreaded entrance of the Red Sea, and though they fouled an Egyptian djerm at the mouth of the Suez Canal, and were greeted by a shower of vociferous abuse from the Reis, the remainder of the voyage was prosperous, and Brian entered the port of Liverpool with a lighter heart than had been his for many years.

His wages were honourably paid, he was furnished with a first-rate certificate, and Captain Grey asked if he would not take ship with him for the next voyage.

Brian declined, we may be sure; but it was in terms as gratifying to the captain as his request had been to Brian.

No sooner did he feel himself free than, resisting the calls of his late companions, he hailed a cab, helped the driver to haul his chest atop, and, singing as he went in the exuberance of his spirits, was soon at the landing stage, and crossing the river in one of the ferry steamers.

Another cab at Woodside! He was on his way to Larch Cottage—soon he lost the landmarks, called to the driver—they turned, then drove on again,—he stopped the cab again, leaped out—the streets were all new to him—again he entered the cab—turned back to the last remembered spot—made a fresh essay—it was useless, as were inquiries. The very name of Larch Cottage was forgotten; swept away with the larches, and the bricks and mortar, the avenue, and the nursery-garden. Dr. Forsyth was forgotten too, or rather the new neighbourhood had no knowledge of earlier inhabitants than themselves.

All his elation was gone. Blank disappointment sat on his features. What had become of his grandmother? What of the Forsyths?

His letters might never have reached them!

Back again with all speed to the ferry and across it. Crimps and landsharks surrounded him on the Liverpool landing stage,

but he turned a deaf ear to them. He had heard enough of them on board the *Dolphin*, and the carpenter of the *Dotterel* had given him a sound word of advice which he had then never supposed he should need. "Never, my lad, listen to them chaps that come round you like flies round a honey pot as soon as you gets ashore. Why, they're worse than moskeetos; they're horseleeches every one on 'em; they'll bleed your pocket, and your brains, and your character, an' when they've sucked you dry, my lad, 'll pitch you out into the street with hardly a rag to cover you. I allus goes to th' Sailors' Home mysell, an' I tells my mates to go there too, if they wants their money to be safe an' their selves too."

And now that Brian was not sure of a home (he had no intention to put himself under the finger and thumb of Mr. Mason) and was cumbered with his kit, he bethought himself of the ship-carpenter's advice.

Canning Place was close at hand, a man with a truck wheeled his sea-chest thither, and Brian in a few minutes found himself in front of the Sailors' Home, a fine lofty building with a richly-ornamented doorway.

His name was entered on the books, with a number of particulars; his kit was placed in the cabin assigned him—but for him there was no stopping to partake of a meal until he had found someone belonging to him.

He ran rather than walked to Lime Street Station, thought the train slow; was out on the Edge Hill platform before the carriages had well come to a standstill.

Alas! when he reached the handsome villa, where the sycamore still flourished, though its leaves were beginning to turn brown, he was not more unknown than was Mr. Mason.

He was answered by a servant maid, who "thought her master leased the house from an agent; could get the agent's name from her mistress."

Sick at heart, he sought the agent, who knew no more than he had previously told Mr. Forsyth.

Unknowingly travelling in his godfather's footsteps he hurried to Dr. Mitchell's.

The great brass plate was gone. Dr. Mitchell had been buried eighteen months, full of years and honours.

Back again into the heart of Liverpool, his own high hopes drowned in a sea of perplexed anxieties.

The office in Castle Street had other occupants! He almost stumbled down the steps in coming out, he was so utterly dazed and bewildered. For support he had to lean against the doorpost from which Mr. Mason's name had disappeared.

It was now too late to make further inquiries; offices were closing and he was growing faint, having tasted nothing since the early morning, save a glass of ale at the Edge Hill railway station, where Mr. Mason was formerly known, and he hoped for a clue to his whereabouts.

There was tea on the tables in the mess-room at the Sailors' Home, everything clean and appetizing; but his appetite was gone. He sat down, his head dropped in his hands, his elbows rested on the long table. Was this the coming home for which he had left his more than kind friends in Ceylon? He set his teeth together and groaned in the very bitterness of spirit. There were between two or three hundred men in the great mess-room when he had gone in, and the coming of one more or less was not much to be noted; but somehow the old carpenter spied him out from the opposite side of another table, and judged from the fact of his being there, as well as from his dejected aspect, that something had gone wrong. He left his seat and went round to the side of Brian.

His horny hand went down on the other's shoulder. "Cheery, messmate!" sang he; "something gone wrong? Not found your friends? Don't be cast down, my lad. Such disappointments are common enough in a seafaring life. We part with a kiss and a good-bye, but we never know who may meet us on shore, or if the kiss and the good-bye may not be for ever. What, your folk only removed! Then, my lad, tuck in like a man; you want ballast, like a ship. And don't be downcast. The secretary here'll find your folk for you, if they are to be found."

"Do you think so?" cried Brian, springing up, his face again irradiated.

"Sure so!" replied the weather-beaten tar. "But what were your folk? I've a notion they were gentlefolk, my lad, an' they're easier found than the common ruck. Aye, aye, there, that's right, eat and drink, and then we'll go and talk it o'er in the hall, where one can have a smoke. But what were your folk?"

Brian told him briefly.

"Grandmother, eh! Well, old folk, and women folk, are not

so easy to find," and the man shook his head, but he brisked up again as Mr. Mason's business was named.

"What! A shipbroker! Well, then, my lad, it's all fair sailing. Folk o' that sort have their names printed in directories and gazettes, an' all sorts o' things. Secretary 'll find him like winking."

It was not done like winking. The directory of one town does not give an address in another, or catalogue removals; nevertheless, before the second day was gone Brian was furnished with the address of Robert Mason, in Finch Lane, London. He was helped also in the disposal of his own superfluous bedding and a few et ceteras, and with many grateful thanks to the secretary of the Sailors' Home, and to the good carpenter, both of whom had done him such signal service, he took leave of the noble institution once more, with something like hope in his breast.

The old carpenter helped him with his chest to Lime Street, and soon with a third-class ticket in his pocket he was steaming through the tunnel to Edge Hill, and on, and on, through a country of which he knew nothing, though he had been half over the world; almost too much occupied with his own hopes and misgivings to notice deep-cutting, barren moss, or cultivated lands.

At Crewe, on a hint from a fellow-passenger, he got out for refreshment, and in doing so chanced to step on the silken train of a lady, who, preceded by a footman in purple and gold, was making her way to a first-class carriage.

"Boor!" ejaculated the elegant lady, turning a scornful glance at him over her shoulder through her fixed eyeglass, whilst she gathered up skirts which ought never to have been trailing there, heedless of the sailor's raised hat or polite apology.

She was followed by a listless young dandy, evidently her son, and three young ladies, one of whom leaned on the arm of an old gentleman of commanding port and pleasing countenance, in which there was as much independent spirit as hearty good feeling. "Keep on your hat, my good fellow; there's no harm done," said he cheerily, as the young dandy, with much profuse attention, handed into the carriage the lovely little creature the old gentleman had in charge, leaving the taller ones to the care of the footman.

"A nice chap that to leave his sisters in the lurch because he

has a sweetheart in tow," thought Brian to himself, as he ran on for his scalding coffee and spongy bun. "That lovely lass is thrown away on that sugar-stick clothes-peg. I don't think I ever saw such a face in my life, or such curls—except Mercy's."

The bell rang, there was a rush to carriages; but through all the scurry and the subsidence to seats, and during the rest of the long journey, Mercy was in his thoughts, Mercy grown up and like the beautiful vision he had seen. Indeed, his imagination took flight into the realm of possibilities, and he wondered if that could be Mercy herself; Mercy discovered by her parents! It was a wild flight, and he told himself so: told himself, too, that if such could possibly be she was farther away from him than ever. But Mercy! Pshaw, his little romp Mercy would have looked down on that fopling with contempt. Yet he had left a child; what change might time not have wrought in the woman! Was not he himself changed?

He determined to keep a look-out at Euston; but though he left his luggage to take care of itself, the long platform was so crowded with boxes and people, that he was barely in time to see a carriage door close on the last sealskin jacket and feathered velvet hat, the two gentlemen jump into a private cab, and all drive off; and singularly, in spite of his own reason, he felt a sense of something lost.

As a provision against contingencies he had been provided at the Sailors' Home with the addresses of one or two respectable houses where temporary lodgings were to be had; but they were in the City, and he had again to throw himself into a cab, though he felt that his small stock of money was rapidly melting. True, he had found in his chest an ample supply of cash. But he had left that with the cashier of the Sailors' Home. He could not touch *that*. It must go back intact to the generous giver, whatever befel.

He found lodgings not far from Tower Hill, and after an early breakfast the next morning, trimmed himself up for his interview with the shipbroker in Finch Lane.

Theobald Capper stared at him as if he had seen a ghost. Perhaps he thought that dysentery had laid Brian in a Columbo grave. At all events he was not too pleased to see him. There was a long conference with uncle and nephew in an inner office before Brian was admitted to the presence of the stepfather, between whom and himself so little love was lost.

The sunburnt, stalwart, handsome young fellow before him was not more changed than was Robert Mason. There were sharp deep lines in his hard face; threads of silver in his black locks and bushy brows; the speckless get-up was scarcely so speckless as of old; the glossy black broadcloth was scarcely so glossy or closely-fitting.

Something was there so slight as to be imperceptible to those in daily contact with him, but palpable to the stepson to whom his very specklessness had been held up as a reproach. Something which spoke of speculations which had not been altogether fortunate.

There was a fire in the office grate. It had not warmed Robert Mason. If anything, he was more than ever icy.

He did not put out his hand, though Brian extended his. All the information he vouchsafed was, "Your bold sister and the upstart foundling deserted my home shortly after we came to London. I know no more." After that, a frigid, "I know nothing," was the only answer to be wrung from him.

After that fresh disappointment and discouragment Brian wore his shoes off his feet rambling hither and thither in fruitless quest of those he sought. But London is wide. He was unskilled in the ways of towns, and knew not how or where to seek. Then the need of remunerative employment pressed upon him, for of any return to the sea, or to his friends in Ceylon, with the aching dread in his breast, was impossible. To eke out his means, he went without half his meals; then sold his few clothes piecemeal to keep him from starvation; ran errands, held horses—anything to get an honest coin. At last, when about to sell his sea-chest to buy him a meal, that chest which held a fortune, did he but know it, his good landlady's husband came in elated with the news that he thought he had got him a first-rate situation.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THREE YEARS.

Great had been Lady Dynevor's surprise to find that, albeit Mercy (or Blanche) rejoiced in the recovery of her father, she was equally loth to quit the dear friends who had reared and sheltered her, who had taken her into their hearts as well as their home, and been during all those years true and steadfast as any of her kin could have been. She was neither awed by my lady's eyeglass, nor dazzled by the prospect of advancement, and clung to Grandma Stapleton in such evident dread of separation, that Sir John felt constrained to leave her amongst her old friends—"at least for the present," a decision as satisfactory to Lady Dynevor as to the Stapletons; although her ladyship was not so well satisfied when her brother remarked, during the drive home, "It speaks well alike for the child and the kind-hearted people who have adopted her, that she is so reluctant to leave them, even for her own father, with rank and wealth to back my claim. Though I must confess it cost me a pang to see my Blanche's child cling to a stranger rather than me."

"Give her time, don't be hasty, give her time to know you; make her and her friends a few judicious presents. Let her wardrobe be replenished with a view to her new station, and by the time she is presentable, she will, no doubt, have learned to love the giver, and be willing to leave those people." And her ladyship, who had trifled with her eyeglass, and given a general survey of her own unimpeachable costume, looked up at him with an air of superior wisdom.

"Those people!" echoed Sir John; "say, rather, her kind protectors, her friends and mine."

Lady Dynevor did not seem to hear the interruption. She went on, "You know, John, it will be quite a kindness to Blanche herself to equip her properly before she enters her new home. If she be sensitive she would feel the difference between herself and her cousins so much. The very servants would

make observations on her attire, which would not only be mortifying to the child, but create a gossip."

"I do not see why it should, Ernestine," he answered. "I saw nothing but what was in good taste about her garments. Perhaps I am no judge. So I had better leave the matter in your hands. See that nothing is wanting."

"My dear Clara and Ernesta," said her ladyship to her daughters, in the privacy of her boudoir, "I was horrified lest that simple brother of mine should bring the unrefined, ill-dressed girl *here* as *your* cousin, in the face of the servants. Be sure, my dears, I did not lose the opportunity of our drive home to suggest the necessity of a new wardrobe for Blanche before she was brought here as his daughter. And as I made it appear that I was desirous to spare the young thing the mortification of a contrast with my daughters' toilettes, and to smooth the way for parting with her friends, your uncle was, as usual, amenable to reason."

Amenable to *her* reason in the matter of dress, Lady Dynevor certainly found Sir John; he was quite willing to cultivate his daughter's affection, and accustom her gradually to the prospect of a new home and new surroundings, involving separation from her good and tried friends; but when she hinted something of weaning Blanche from the well-meaning but inferior people among whom she had fallen, a cloud gathered on the generous face of Sir John and warned her to steer clear of dangerous shoals.

"My lady," said Sir John—and he never said "my lady" but when he was displeased—"once before you spoke of 'those people' in tones of contempt; you have now spoken of them as 'inferior people.' In what consists their inferiority? Mrs. Stapleton and her granddaughter are alike women of education and ladylike bearing. They may not have rank or wealth, or birth, or the courtly gloss of your ladyship's friends; but they have kind hearts, madam, and 'kind hearts are more than coronets.' Let me hear no more of inferior people in their case, and never let me hear another word of weaning Blanche from those who have been all in all to her so many years; who have fostered and cherished my darling as one of their own. Tell me, Ernestine, which of your courtly friends would have done so much?"

Little likelihood was there of weaning Blanche from the Stapletons, although she was ere long, and after a clinging,

lingering leave-taking, transported to Rutherford Chase, and turned over to a French governess and a small army of "finishing-masters," over whom Lady Dynevor presided.

The girl had longed to be acknowledged by somebody; but, being claimed, life-long affection was at strife with filial instinct, and the inevitable parting was an agony. The Tudor mansion, with its sylvan chase and sheltering hills, fed her artistic fancy, and had Brian, Hesba, and Grandma Stapleton been there also, she had been well content; but not all the love, all the gifts her late-found father lavished on her, not all the honeyed sweetness of her manœuvring aunt, the patronising cousinship of Clara and Ernesta, or the lisping admiration of Ernest, Lord Dynevor, could compensate for their absence.

The latter, a pale-faced, light-haired, languid insipidity, whose chief characteristics were a silken moustache and a rimless eye-glass, voted Dynevor Manor (which came into his own hands about the time the shoal of teachers were dismissed) "insuffawably dull," and Rutherford Chase "ineffawably jolly," and somehow contrived to spend most of his time at the latter.

A hint from his lady-mother, that unless a matrimonial alliance united the contiguous estates the larger one would be likely to pass from the family, had served as a spur to urge him thither; once there the unsophisticated loveliness of his charming cousin held him enthralled. Assuming all the privileges of cousinship, he hung over her at her easel, followed her about the house and grounds, and did her bidding much as a well-behaved poodle might have done, and was estimated accordingly. She was soon weary alike of his praises and his platitudes, and took refuge by the side of her more manly and intelligent father, whenever she found his lordship oppressively vapid or oppressively affectionate; one thought ever recurring to her at such time, "What a contrast to Brian, dear, brave, resolute Brian!"

Sir John, on the restoration of his daughter, had thrown up his commission and devoted himself to the development of her affection—and the development of his estate likewise, as a something dedicated to her. They might be seen together, on horseback or on foot, in the village, or the green lanes, or the greener woods at all hours, he, a white-haired, tall, broad-chested man of gallant bearing, and she, a light and buoyant creature with a wealth of chestnut hair and large brown eyes in which dreams and determination seemed to meet and blend.

She was the very light of her father's eyes; and when, unspoiled by his indulgence, or by the artificial training of Lady Dynevor, Miss Rutherford was duly presented at Court, in the triple bloom of beauty, wealth, and romance, might have become the light of many eyes had not Lord Ernest Dynevor been ever in close attendance. Inference—for which society accredited Lady Dynevor—assigned her to him in closer bonds than cousinship, and everyone seemed satisfied, unless perhaps outside admirers —and herself.

Her first season was over. She was back again at Rutherford Chase with the inevitable Dynevors; although her ladyship and her daughters were ostensibly located at Dynevor Manor House, and were only drawn to the Chase by "deep interest in the welfare of their relative." It might be invidious to insinuate that Lady Dynevor had economical ideas of saving the ample allowance she had from Sir John, or that she speculated in matrimony for Ernesta amongst the visitors at the Chase, whilst keeping a guardian eye over the heiress designed for her son; but so ran the gossip of the servants' hall.

They were on their way to the sea-side for the autumn when Brian and Blanche met on the platform at Crewe, and passed as strangers! And what would Brian not have given to know that the fair creature he had noted looked out at the open carriage window and watched him as he went, even remarking to her lady-aunt, "How like is that sailor's walk to my brother Brian's?"

It would have been nothing to him that she was checked with, "My dear, no well-bred young lady would follow with her eyes the footsteps of a common sailor. All sailors have the same walk."

Nothing! *He* would have claimed Mercy as his sister whosoever had been by her side, had he but recognised her under the name of "Blanche," the name on the young lord's lip.

* * * * * * *

Since Mercy went away from her old friends as Blanche Rutherford more than three years have run their rapid course. Willie Forsyth has been established as a surgeon at Camden Town for upwards of twelve months, with only his sister Effie as housekeeper.

It is said that, following in his father's footsteps, he is rising into repute, and only lacks a wife to make success certain.

He considers he has waited quite long enough, and is growing somewhat impatient. When he entered on the house and practice his father had purchased for him, he had anticipated that Hesba would enter it also, and that their home would become the home of Grandma Stapleton.

Much to his surprise, there was a double opposition raised. Though all others had given up Brian as lost, they two had not. Mrs. Stapleton had a profound belief in the sympathy of twinship, and Hesba's reiterated assertion that she was conscious her brother's life had more than once been in peril, but that the danger was over, and he as well in bodily health as herself, had due weight. The old lady declined to break up her home in North Crescent lest her grandson should be unable to trace them when he returned. She never calculated that as "a lodger" she would have no name in a directory even then. And Hesba, whose affection for her brother had nowise weakened in long absence, could only say to her eager lover, "Do not urge me beyond my strength. You know I love you dearly, Willie; but if I were to fail in my duty to Brian or to the good grandma to whom I owe so much, there would be small hope for my wifely duties hereafter. And to be fully a helpmeet for you, I *must* finish my medical course and take my degree."

So he had waited with what grace he could until she had completed her training at Gray's Inn Road Free Hospital, and, with Miss Agnew for companion (who found subjects for her canvas in the mountain scenery and peasantry of picturesque Wicklow), had gone to Dublin, and after a period of hard study and probation, passed with *éclat* her examination at the "King and Queen's College of Physicians, Ireland," returning thence a duly qualified licentiate.

And now, having talked over the matrimonial matter privately with Mrs. Stapleton, Mr. Willie Forsyth, who has reached the limit of his patience, bids Hesba one fine autumnal evening, "Wrap yourself up, dear, and come with me for a stroll."

She might have a prescience of what is coming, she has so warm a flush on her cheek, and kisses grandma so impressively on going forth. Yet she does not leave Mrs. Stapleton alone. Both Miss Agnew and Cecilia are there; they have had their home under that roof ever since the Dublin expedition rendered a companion necessary for the old lady at home as well as for the young one in a strange capital.

The handsome, finely-assimilated pair turn mechanically into Tottenham Court Road, on their customary way to Regent's Park, singularly silent amid its bustle and din. They walk on briskly, as is their wont, but unaccountably dumb, until the glitter of a jeweller's shop apparently breaks the spell.

He leads her towards the broad window.

"I wish to make you a present to commemorate your success, dear love," said he, looking down into her eyes. "What shall it be, a locket or a ring?"

"A locket, Willie, to hold Brian's face. I see *you* daily before me," she answers, as they turn into the jeweller's. "I have long wished to secure the likeness taken so long ago, in a locket, for wear."

A golden locket with a star of pearls is selected. There is a loverlike whisper that she is the "star of his life," and then follows a suggestion that she should have a ring to match the locket.

He steps up the shop to look at something, says a word to the shopman, and returns.

To Hesba's amazement wedding-rings are set before her. For a moment rebellious blood mounts to her face; she thinks he has taken an unfair advantage, but she quickly remembers how long he has waited her pleasure, and with as much composure as she can command she holds out her finger to be fitted.

She takes him to task when they are clear of the shop, but with that golden charm in his breast-pocket he bears it blithely, answering only with smiles and the monosyllabic question, "When?"

As they pass into the park at the south-eastern entrance, Willie points to the pale crescent of the young moon in the clear sky overhead, and says it is a fair augury. He has just won from her a promise to be his before October has run out, and they are on the threshold of the month. The trees have not as yet shed their foliage, though the brown and russet leaves begin to rustle as if they were ready to fly at the bidding of the breeze. And now and then a solitary leaf does drop on hat or bonnet as they linger in the friendly shadow, laying plans for their fair future, with hands clasped closely as they hope to clasp their lives, two beings supremely happy in each other's love, yet man and woman enough to know something of the world's battle-field, and that they must fight the good fight together if they would win in the end.

Alas! there has been a fierce battle waging not far away in an untrained human breast at war with itself and the world,—and fought to an ignoble issue.

A stifled scream and a splash in the ornamental water close at hand puts lovers' dreams to flight.

Willie's overcoat is off and flung to Hesba as he runs, led by that cry of desperation, to where the circling eddies tell their doleful tale. And now a call for "Help!" goes out from Hesba's whitened lips. She sees her lover struggling in the very water with a creature who refuses to be saved, and she clasps her hands in agony for both.

But he is so cool and skilful, the would-be suicide so small and slight, he has the senseless mite of a woman on the bank ere long; and when a park-keeper rushes up with a couple of boys at his heels, Hesba and Willie, kneeling on the wet grass by her side, have succeeded in restoring animation.

They have recognised the miserable object of their solicitude. Dinah Smart knows nothing of *them*. Her big black eyes unclose with a stony, thankless stare. A boy's suggestion of "Perlice" smites her oozing ears, and Hesba's tender, sweet-voiced "Dinah" only sounds an alarm.

Dinah's old horror of the police is strong upon her. From the day of her summary dismissal by Lady Dynevor she has drifted from service to service, descending a step in the social scale at every change, until grim, griping, hungry, homeless, hopeless poverty holds her in his clutches, and the police scowl at her, but she has hitherto kept herself out of *their clutches*—and now?

Who but the police would care whether she drowned or died in the gutter? she argues with herself. So she sits doggedly silent, huddled up in a horserug in a corner of the cab, which she imagines is hurrying her to a police station, brooding over her own wrongs, and wondering what the fine gentleman and lady who are going to give her in charge would have done in her case.

Not until she is lifted from the cab, and carried up a private staircase, deposited in an easy chair in a room filled with light and warmth, and familiar objects, recognises old Mrs. Stapleton's kindly face bent over her, and feels a tear fall on her thin, little, brown hand, does she realise that she is with friends, and not with the police.

Hesba's chief concern is now her betrothed, for Willie Forsyth is no more proof against a soaking than Dinah Smart.

"My dear Willie, do go to bed here and throw off your wet clothes at once. Do let us take care of you, or you may be laid up."

He will not remain there. "One patient in a house is sufficient," he says, as he snatches a hurried kiss, whispers something of having "a dear wife on his own hearth to care for him ere long," and is off in the waiting cab.

Dinah's wet garments yet cling to her, but there is a struggle before she will submit to be stripped by Jemima and placed among warm blankets in a comfortable bed. "What do I care for my life? Have I not tried to end it?" is her sullen refusal. But Hesba's promptness and decision overpower resistance, and she is cared for against her will, her chief anxiety being to hide and retain a small bag suspended from her neck.

That she has something there she is desirous to conceal Hesba sees, but no one seeks to probe a secret she may have, unless it be Jemima, whose bed she shares, and she is silent, sullenly silent about herself, watchful and suspicious of the very kindness which feeds and clothes and nurses her to health. She expresses no surprise when James Forsyth comes in and reads her a lecture in his vernacular on the sin of suicide, and though she misses Brian and Mercy she asks no questions. She hears so much of the former that she knows he has been long at sea, and that his friends are watching wearily for sign or token of his existence. Of the latter she hears nothing, and is afraid to ask.

She hears them frequently speak of a certain "Blanche," and once Miss Agnew mentions a picture by a Miss Rutherford in her presence; and the name strikes her ear, but the name is not uncommon, and she sees no connection between the twain or with anyone she has known. There was no Miss Rutherford in Lady Dynevor's circle.

Nor does she know that the missing will has been found, and that she stands acquitted in their sight.

But she is sufficiently grateful to offer her gratuitous services in the preparation of a trousseau in hand.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A FIERY ORDEAL.

SOMEWHERE about this time a letter from Willie Forsyth to Sir John solicited the presence of Miss Rutherford at his approaching wedding with Miss Stapleton whilst one from Hesba to herself proffers a like request.

Blanche, exuberant, proposes herself as bridesmaid. Sir John hesitates—he is not unwilling, but he has the *gout*, is unable to accompany her to town. Lady Dynevor is aghast, denounces the project as utter demoralisation, and suggests a handsome present to the bride as a substitute.

Blanche contends there is no such demoralisation as ingratitude, and Sir John, who is getting somewhat weary of his fashionable sister's dictatorship, agrees with his darling that "present and bridesmaid *both* are not too much."

"I am ashamed of you, Ernestine," he says. "*Nothing* we could give or do would pay the debt of gratitude we owe to them."

If Lady Dynevor is of another opinion she scarcely ventures to maintain it; yet it is with a very ill grace she consents to chaperone her refractory niece, contriving, however, that Lord Dynevor should afford them his protection by the way, and holding a mental resolution to see the pair engaged before their return. And really she is so clever, and Blanche so little on her guard, there is no knowing to what the girl may stand committed before she is aware.

There is a glad meeting between Blanche and the Stapletons, glistening eyes as well as smiles and kisses, a meeting at which her ladyship is not present. The following day Blanche Rutherford with my lady's help) orders an ample trousseau and a bridal-robe of white poplin for her friend, and a bridesmaid's simpler dress for herself, in another department of the self-same establishment where she, as Mercy Stapleton, was offered as a milliner's apprentice by Mr. Mason; and where she might be, indeed, a toiler instead of a purchaser but for Hesba's prompti-

tude and self-reliance. She asks herself, could she possibly be too grateful to such a friend?

Then the artistic taste of the younger lady has full play in the selection of jewelry, plate, glass, china, and other et ceteras from sundry establishments for the new household at Camden Town, whilst her more patrician aunt can only ply her eyeglass and enter a languid protest against the lavish superfluity and cost of presents "so utterly unsuited for young people of *that* class, my dear."

Lady Dynevor is utterly confounded when her niece, with infinite archness, puts up a smiling face and says, "*What* class, aunt? Do you know much of their class? I do not think I have bought anything unsuitable; and no gift I could make to Hesba would be equal to her deserts. Her kindness and goodness to me are not to be weighed and measured. I may be mistaken, but nothing is too good for *that* class of people."

It is the bridal eve. All day long Blanche's gifts and Sir John's have come pouring in, calling for fresh admiration and ejaculations as, one after another, some lovely or useful thing is held up for general inspection, a huge bride-cake with fairy-like decorations closing the catalogue, each fresh "thing of beauty" evoking from radiant Grandma Stapleton the remark, "How different things were when I was a girl," or, "We had nothing like this when I was a girl," as often as not toning into a sigh and the half-audible wish, "Oh, that dear Brian could only be here now!"

Willie Forsyth is there, if Brian is not; Willie as much interested in the array as is Hesba herself, even in that marvellous combination of poplin, and pearls, and lace called a bridal robe. He is there, scarcely to be driven away in time for Dinah and the Miss Agnews to clear and arrange the rooms for the morrow. And once out of the room he loiters and lingers with Hesba in the hall as if loth to say "good-night."

Dinah, wonderfully in her element amongst the finery, is herself anxious to get to bed, for she has had a shock, and longs to hide her head and *think*.

She has learned that Blanche Rutherford, the donor of these exquisite things, is one and the same with little Mercy Stapleton whose sleeve-bands have been fetters to her so long.

"There, Willie is gone at last!" cries Hesba, as she sets to work with the rest. "I thought he would never go. I told him he would oversleep himself if he were not off."

And now all arrangements are complete. Bride, bridegroom, bridesmaids in their several homes are sunk in slumber's lap.

A cry goes forth on the night air—"Fire! Fire! Fire!" The deserted streets are at once alive with people sprung from no one knows where—all coursing towards one point, lit by the flaring beacon in the sky.

An incautious smoker who has taken a cigar to bed to compose his thoughts and steady his nerves for a proposal he is about to make on the morrow has fallen asleep, and Lady Dynevor's town residence is all ablaze.

The police thunder at the door as the first engine comes tearing up the street. There is a cry from a bystander that the house is closed, the family away. But as the flames leap up and rage within, scared domestics escape from basement and attic, by area and roof: and from the hall door emerges the young lord, bearing with him a faded, fainting skeleton of a woman huddled in a dressing-gown, for whom he finds refuge in a neighbouring mansion.

The servants are safe. Lady Dynevor is safe. The fire-escape is idle, the solitary engine plays as on an empty house, through which the raging flames career with a roar of mockery, belching forth from windows and roof.

Back comes Lord Dynevor in frantic haste. "My cousin? Miss Rutherford? Where is she?"

A white-robed figure with hair unbound throws up a sash on the second floor, and shrieks for aid.

A cry, "The heiress! the heiress!" runs through the crowd, and excitement spends itself in shouts and suggestions. Other engines are now at work. The fire-escape is up, but in vain.

The man attempting to ascend is compelled to return.

"Oh, save her! save her!" cries the young lord, wringing his helpless hands. "A hundred pounds to the man who saves her!"

A second man makes the attempt, and fails. The flames from the first floor windows lick the machine and daunt him.

Her piteous cry reaches them. She is seen to shrink from the scorching tongues at her back.

"Oh, save my beloved Blanche!" again he cries. "A hundred—two hundred pounds to save her!"

"Try yourself, master," is shouted by the crowd, as the firemen are driven back, and he, appalled, can but wring impotent hands and double his reward.

A blanket is brought, held out; there is a call for her to "leap." She essays to mount the sill.

Just then a City engine rattles up. She is seen to stagger back and fall overpowered.

A groan from the crowd.

"*Five* hundred pounds for her life!" from white-faced Lord Dynevor.

A fireman leaps from the City engine, snatches the blanket, and is up the escape in spite of restraining hands or the warning that the roof is about to fall.

He is seen to stoop into the very flames—is at the window, and in the escape with a something in the blanket.

As they reach the ground the roof goes in with a crash.

"The nearest hospital," the brave fireman whispers hoarsely, as he resigns his burden to her friends amid the plaudits of the crowd, and after a word or two with their leader disappears from their midst; just as Willie Forsyth, aroused from sleep by the rattling of engines and the cry of fire, makes his way to the conflagration and through the crowd in time to take the initiative in the care of Blanche. Lord Dynevor seems dazed into imbecility.

But there are people on the spot ready and willing to lend blankets—anything to form a litter for her conveyance. The hospital which numbers Dr. Forsyth amongst its surgical staff is comparatively near at hand. Thither she is borne by willing helpers from the crowd.

Sad news for the Stapletons—sad news for Sir John! His daughter, his darling, hovering between life and death in a public hospital, and he held in the throes of gout at Rutherford Chase!

"My niece in a hospital!" is Lady Dynevor's first haughty exclamation; but as chances of life and death and heirship pass rapidly through her mind, she seems to think less of the disgrace than of the probabilities involved; and is full of eager questionings about her "poor dear darling."

She makes light of her own loss in face of the injury to her niece, and the imminent peril in which she continues.

She knows the insurance company will make good the loss of property, but she does not know how far Sir John will hold her and her son responsible for his daughter.

She learns that ere long. Learns first, through the searching

inquiry of the insurance people, that her son's cigar was the primary cause of the fire—and its fearful catastrophe; and she tries to hush it up.

Be thankful, all who love the girl, there was a hospital near at hand to receive her! Be thankful Dr. Forsyth was there to take charge of her case, and with power to bring in Hesba as nurse—Hesba, whose wedding-day is still in the future, and to whose sleepless, unremitting, skilled attention Blanche Rutherford mainly owes her recovery, under Heaven!

For she was fearfully burned, her clothes dropping from her in tinder, her glorious wealth of hair gone.

Fright and pain have brought on delirium, in which "bravery" and "Brian," "cowardice" and "Ernest" strangely mingle with her horror and despair.

As, after many days, consciousness and strength slowly return, she says she only remembers falling back, and then an angel with the voice of Brian lifting her up as if to Heaven.

Hesba tells her the angel was a brave young fireman, who, though himself badly burned, refused indignantly Lord Dynevor's proffered reward.

"The craven!" she murmurs; "yes, I heard him offering *others* money to do that which *he* had not the heart to do—for *love*."

There is a long pause. Later in the day she says, "Ask Willie to bring my brave preserver here. *I* will reward him if he will let me. If he will have me *I* will marry *him*."

"Marry him? Your father? What will he say?" suggests Hesba.

"I will marry no one else. My father is a brave man. He loves bravery, and he loves me. He will not think anything too much for my life. But perhaps even the fireman might reject me now all my beauty is gone."

"Poor Blanche, her delirium must be returning," thinks Hesba, laying a cool hand on her brow. (There is no feeling a pulse through the swathing bands on the wrists.)

Her brow is no warmer than the hand. She is calm and collected. It is clear she has not spoken in haste or delirium, for she returns to the subject the following day.

"I have made up my mind, Hesba; so brave a man must be good and true; if *he* will have *me* I will marry *him*."

Lady Dynevor is horrified. "Reject the heir-presumptive to

an earldom for a common fireman! It is incredible! Sir John will not listen to it, I am convinced."

Sir John is certainly startled, but he does listen, and takes the matter into consideration. There is nothing in this world so dear to him as his daughter. There are few things more contemptible than the nephew who feared to risk his own life, yet tempted strangers to do that from which he shrank. He has not yet heard of the cigar smoked in bed.

"Marry Lord Dynevor! No, my lady, not if the earl's coronet were already on his brow; no daughter of mine shall marry a coward." And my lady knows that her brother is in earnest.

Yes, he is in earnest so far, but by no means eager to fall in with his daughter's romantic proposition. He will wait. The sick fancy may die out. He will find some other way to reward the young man.

Weeks go by. At her own desire Blanche Rutherford is removed from the hospital to North Crescent, where dear Grandma Stapleton can relieve overtaxed Hesba; or at a pinch Miss Agnew share the night watches; for restoration, without unsightly scars on neck and face, is long and tedious.

No one thinks of placing her again in charge of Lady Dynevor; certainly not Sir John.

There is a little creature on whom Blanche had not counted who begs and prays to be allowed to nurse her day or night: and after some demur from James Forsyth, Dinah is made free of the sick room, as deft a handmaid as ever spread a plaister or applied a lotion. Her devotion is something to be marvelled over. But no one traces it back to those days in the nursery at Larch Cottage when the little foundling had *love* and *pity* for the older foundling—the first she had ever known.

Again Blanche reverts to her chivalrous deliverer. "He can be no common man or he would not have refused the five hundred pounds," and Grandma Stapleton is quite of her opinion.

But Blanche has another idea which she tells to no one.

Sir John is generous as brave. His pride of birth yields to gratitude and affection; and, it may be added, to his daughter's persistence. He seeks out the young fireman, finds that he has not long been dismissed from St. Bartholomew's Hospital; and, moreover, discovers that he is both educated and intelligent. He was seated reading on one of the shafts of his engine when

he was pointed out to Sir John, and the latter taking up the old volume discovered that it was a copy of "Æschylus."

Sir John's surprise was manifest.

"Oh, sir, I had a tolerable education in my younger days, though I missed going to college."

"How was that?"

"Well, sir, I was sent to sea instead, by one who did not love me overmuch. I have been trying of late to recover my lost education."

When pressed to name a reward, "To shake hands with the young lady I saved," is all the answer.

"That is a small matter," said Sir John; "but is there nothing we can do for yourself or your wife, to prove our gratitude?" He had a sort of vague hope even then that his daughter's preserver was already married.

The young man shook his head. "I have no wife," said he; "and I never shall have, unless I succeed in finding my relatives, and a young girl the very winds blew into my arms at sea when I was a boy and she a babe."

"Blown into your arms, do you say?" Sir John's start of surprise was taken for incredulity.

"Yes, sir. It may seem strange, but it's true for all that. My father was a sea-captain, and it was in the Bay of——"

"Then your name cannot be Jack Ready," hurriedly interrupted the baronet.

A smile broke over the face of the fireman. "Oh, no, sir. Jack Ready is only a nickname given by my mates here. My real name is Brian Stapleton."

Yes; Brian Stapleton, whom we have seen put ashore in Ceylon, left ill and moneyless to die or to recover and make his way back to England as best he might. Brian Stapleton, who had survived hardships and sufferings incredible, and kept a brave and hopeful heart under all. Brian, who, after all his perils and escapes, had been finally stranded in London lodgings. Heartsick, without money, without a trade, he had found the sailor's only resource on land—the fire brigade. It has restored him all he had lost.

Sir John is of too noble a nature to hesitate when once he hears Brian Stapleton's name. He sees the finger of God in the double reunion, and he feels that to Brian and his family he owes his daughter's preservation and her culture. He is the

one to lead the young fireman, still in his uniform, to his relatives in North Crescent; and when the excitement of the meeting with Hesba and grandma has in part subsided, and Blanche has been cautiously prepared, to be his introducer to his daughter.

There is little need of that. "Ah, Brian, I knew it was you! I knew your voice. I knew the way you used to lift me up and carry me when I hurt myself as a child. I knew it was you! And I was almost as sure it was you I saw long ago on the railway platform at Crewe."

"At Crewe!" cried Brian with a start; "then I was not deceived. I saw you entering a carriage—but your escort called you Blanche; yet I turned away half unconvinced that I was mistaken."

There is no mistake now. Little need to offer her as a reward, save in jest, which turns out to be earnest. And though Brian has never seen her since her girlhood, he is not likely to turn a deaf ear to her love and the father's proffer, as he had done erewhile in Ceylon. He gave her his boy-heart when she was a baby: she will keep it until both are old and grey.

Lady Dynevor is furious. "What, Sir John! Give your daughter, give Rutherford Chase, to a City fireman!"

"He is more than a fireman, Ernestine!"

"The son of a sea-captain!" and she curls her aristocratic nose in scorn.

"My lady," said he, "I told you once that 'kind hearts were more than coronets.' Tennyson himself wrote it once '*True* hearts,' and Blanche maintains it should be 'Brave hearts;' but as this young seaman, or fireman, or what you will, is at once *kind*, *true*, and *brave*, I think he *is* worth more than an empty coronet. I shall not be afraid to leave either daughter or estate in his hands. And he does not come to his bride so penniless as to create gossip for your 'set.' He gave to Blanche a few 'pretty stones,' as he called them, yesterday, stones he had picked up by a river in Ceylon. Lady Dynevor, they are rubies and carbuncles of immense value. And he inherits private property besides."

Grandma Stapleton is blessed. James Forsyth rejoices to have secured Brian's property for him. Only Lady Dynevor laments; she retreats to Switzerland in disgrace; never to show her face in English society again, for Sir John and others know at last that she had kept father and child apart for years.

A dwarfish little creature, once her maid, with eyes opened and heart softened by kindness, has made a confession fatal to my lady. Goaded by poverty, she had pledged the child's sleeve-bands, and now, from the long-secreted bag, produces the pawn-ticket, and with it the litigated shares! She had found them in the lobby under Mr. Mason's overcoat. She had kept them to spite him—had carried a small fortune about with her unappropriated. There is hope for Dinah yet.

Their recovery involves restitution to Mr. Mason of the hundreds he had paid into court on their account; and he being no longer a prosperous gentleman, the sum is an unexpected windfall, enabling him to keep afloat.

It, however, also involves an explanation; and it somewhat damps his satisfaction to learn that the poor foundling he had despised is the daughter of a wealthy baronet, and shortly to be united to Brian Stapleton. It is somewhat about as satisfactory as the report of the other forthcoming union is to his unmarried nephew, Theobald Capper.

I have said Grandma Stapleton is blessed. But who so blessed as Hesba and Blanche now Brian is restored to them? Even Willie for the time being is cast into the shade, and declares he is growing jealous.

There is a double wedding. Sir John gives away both brides. And the noble old man, who continues to maintain that brave and true hearts are "*more than coronets*," for all that uses his influence to obtain the reversion of the Rutherford baronetcy and estates to his fine son-in-law, Brian.

There had previously been a far-away wedding in Ceylon, at which there were grand doings. Anita had consoled herself with Mr. Pereira, and good Mr. Calvert expressed his perfect content. The ruby which found its way back to Ceylon, set among diamonds as a bracelet for the bride, was well understood as the thank-offering of a grateful heart.

THE END.

A BLUSH ROSE.

CHAPTER I.

ORPHANED.

It was the month of October, and, for a wonder, not raining in Spindleton, when James Vaudrey, hosier and haberdasher, took his way after business hours from his shut-up shop in Newmarket Street to his other establishment in Older Street, where a good dwelling-house supplemented the large-windowed shop. Indeed, the shop was an innovation on a goodly private house, and had an ascent of several broad steps. The shutters were up, and all in darkness save where a home-welcome streamed from the fan-light over the private entrance from an oil-lamp, hung within the wide lobby to which he obtained ingress by merely turning the door-handle. (No one thought of spring-locking or chaining housedoors until bedtime in Spindleton in those days.) Besides the customary hall table and chairs, a few et ceteras in the way of luggage caught his eye in passing.

Hanging up his hat in the hall, he turned the handle of another door and entered the snug warm parlour behind the shop. There Mrs. Vaudrey, a remarkably pretty woman, who had barely crossed the Rubicon of thirty, was seated near the fire with a quantity of patchwork on the table and a wicker cradle by her side, in which reposed a pretty pink specimen of feminine humanity, some five or six weeks old.

"How are we all to-night?" said he, stooping to kiss his wife and have a glimpse at the little one before he turned to toast his back at the fire; "and how is Amabel? I see by the hampers and boxes they are here."

"Yes; Jenny went in a coach from the stand to meet them at the quay. They only came in at eight o'clock, as hungry as hunters—at least, Amabel was—and oh! James, she has grown such a tomboy! And her speech! I cannot tell you how it shocked me, it was so broad!"

He smiled as he asked, "And what of the new nurse?"

"*That* is what Mrs. Marbury says," and a letter was put into his hand.

He drew near to the table and snuffed the candles before he ventured on the letter. After skimming the contents he read aloud:—

"I hope, Mrs. Vaudrey, you will not treat poor Rosa as an ordinary nursemaid. She is very sensitive, and would feel it keenly. But, indeed, I know I may trust to your kindness, and that of Miss Jenny, or I should not have sent her. She is at present naturally much cast down; but will doubtless soon recover her spirits in your cheerful household. And I am certain you will find her a sensible, modest, and steady girl, one you can rely on."

"Worthy credentials from a worthy source," remarked James Vaudrey as he folded up the letter. "Mrs. Marbury's word is better than some people's affidavit. Where is the girl, and what is she like?"

He threw himself as he spoke on the ponderous black horsehair covered sofa at the door end of the room beyond the table, where he could catch the gleam of the fire, rest his limbs, and—listen. He knew he had set his wife's tongue going busily as did her glancing needle through the patchwork quilt.

He was a man of few words, she a woman of many. Their conversation was apt to be one-sided.

"Oh," she answered, "Rosa went upstairs with Jenny to put Amabel and Jack to bed, and has not come down again. I suppose Jenny is showing the girl where she is to sleep and place her clothes, and having a talk with her to make her feel at home." ("Just like Jenny!" thought Mr. V.) "I could tell you better what she is like if Amabel had not made such a noisy rush to kiss and hug us all, and had not been in such a hurry to carry her off to the kitchen and nursery. She seemed a slim girl about sixteen years old—I don't think she could be more—with a pale, pensive countenance and a sort of coffee-brown hair; but I could not see the colour of her eyes, they were so downcast. She had a good cloth cloak on over her black stuff frock, and her black cottage bonnet was trimmed with crape. Mrs. Marbury has sent her out very respectably indeed, considering!"

"Considering what, my dear?" put in Mr. Vaudrey, quietly, as he lay with his hands clasped behind his head on the sofa arm.

"Why, considering—James, I wish you would snuff the candles—considering that Mrs. Marbury must have done it out of her own pocket. Did I not tell you that Rosa Bateson was an orphan?"

The taciturn man obeyed, once more laid down the steel snuffers in their tray, and himself on the sofa, with a mere "Did you?"

"Did I! Now, James, how provoking you are! You never remember what I tell you. Do you not recollect being told that Rosa Bateson's father was the owner of some saltworks in Cheshire, not far from Mrs. Marbury's, and that somehow, after the duty was taken off salt, his affairs became involved, and that after two or three years' ineffectual struggling he became bankrupt, and being a man of high principle and strict honour, the disgrace killed him? You *must* remember!"

Looking up to thread her needle, Mrs. Vaudrey saw her husband shake his head in dissent.

"Not remember! What a man you are!" went on the chatty woman. "Then I suppose you will need reminding that Mrs. Bateson herself was in delicate health at the time, and the double shock—her husband's sudden death from heart disease coming close upon their plunge from prosperity into poverty—threw the poor lady into a rapid decline. I am sure it brought tears into my eyes when Mrs. Marbury told me how she found Mrs. Bateson and her two girls, when she went to say they need not trouble themselves about her little account, and to offer to make their mourning without charging for it."

"Very good of Mrs. M.!" from the sofa.

"Yes; so I said. Well, she found their good house shut up, stripped of everything, the beautiful gardens all trampled down and littered with straw; Mrs. Bateson and her two girls, Rosa and Edda, in a poor cottage previously occupied by one of their own workpeople, with scarcely furniture enough for their common needs—almost without food or money—and yet too proud to seek assistance: almost too proud to accept it, however delicately tendered. Rosa was as reserved as her mother with respect to their circumstances. It was little Edda, who felt the unaccustomed pinching of hunger sharp, who let out the full secret of their dire necessity to her mamma's good dressmaker.

"Mrs. Marbury said she was completely puzzled how to

smuggle a hamper of groceries and other food into the cottage without wounding their feelings or giving offence. She *did* manage it, however, and she managed to obtain admittance for Mr. Lindop, their old doctor, who had been dismissed when there were no means to pay him; and *he* laid down the law to Miss Rosa that unless her mother had proper sustenance, wheresoever it came from, she would die; and she, the good creature, endeavoured to make the mother rally for the sake of her children. But it wasn't much use.

"Love for her mother overcame Rosa's pride. The little niceties sent for the invalid were tenderly and scrupulously administered; but in order to provide the girl herself with proper nourishment, it was necessary to have a liberal customer for the netted silk purses, tapework, and embroidery she worked during her day and night watches by the sick bed. You understand, James?"

"Yes, I understand. Poor child!" murmured the listener on the sofa. "She would not accept *charity* for *herself*."

"Exactly so, James; and would you believe, it was not until Mrs. Bateson was actually dying, that Mrs. Marbury learned she had a married sister in Ashtown, who was Edda's godmother, and in good circumstances. It then came out that Mr. King, the brother-in-law, had been applied to by Mr. Bateson at the outset of his difficulties, when a friendly hand might have averted the catastrophe, and been coarsely repulsed; and they had held no communication afterwards.

"With death and poverty on the hearth it was no use standing on ceremony. Dr. Lindop took upon himself to acquaint Mrs. King that her sister was dying. And just in time for the funeral Mrs. King arrived—a fussy, self-important woman, more concerned over the probable expense and the disgrace the bankruptcy had brought upon the family than over the suffering of the dead-and-gone sister or her orphan girls in their fall from prosperity to penury. She grumbled over the costs of the poor funeral before she paid them, and discussed the conduct of the dead and the prospects of the bereaved children in their presence, with thoughtless disregard of either the mute agony of Rosa or the convulsive sobs of little Edda, who was not to be comforted. The aunt's lamentations were more for herself than them. It was hard, she said, that she, with a family of her own, should be expected to maintain her sister's children too; indeed, she was

sure Mr. King would not hear of it. She was willing to take her namesake, Edda, and bring her up with her own children, but she could do nothing for Rosa. The girl could not expect to be kept in idleness. She was quite old enough to take a situation and keep herself, and she must do so."

"Well, there was some reason in that," said Mr. Vaudrey. "Mr. King and the family *would* have to be considered."

"Yes, James, I know that—and the girls were *her* relations, not his; but I think she might have considered how delicately they had been reared and the trouble they were in, and not have wounded their sensitive feelings by blurting out this in their faces."

"My dear," again from the sofa, "confine yourself to facts. You were not present, and can be no judge of Mrs. King's manner or motives."

"True, James," and an impatient little jerk snapped the wife's thread; "but I was told that Mrs. King's high-handed manner was most offensive. She never said so much as 'thank you' to either Dr. Lindop or Mrs. Marbury, but took their gratuitous services as matters of course. And I heard that it was painful to witness the efforts of Rosa to control her feelings. The girl's face alternately flushed and paled. At last her spirit of independence overpowered her natural timidity, and she said, 'I *will* work and keep myself and Edda too, if you please, aunt, if Mrs. Marbury will only show me how. I would rather not trespass on our relations, and I do not wish to part from my sister!' And would you believe, James, the aunt would have taken the poor girl at her word, and have left both behind without a home to shelter them, if Mrs. Marbury and the doctor had not both taken up the matter sharply, and made her feel her responsibility, as well as the impossibility of a girl not sixteen, unused to work, maintaining another besides herself."

"Poor child! A nice sort of individual to tackle. I give our friend and the doctor all credit! I hope they brought her to reason," was the running commentary.

"They made the woman ashamed at last, and then it was settled that Edda should go home with her to Ashtown, and Mrs. Marbury take charge of Rosa until she could find her a suitable situation. The parting of the sisters affected everybody but the aunt, though Rosa had learned self-repression by her mother's sick bed, and was overheard comforting the younger

one with the assurance that some day she would have a home of her own, and *then* Edda should live with *her*."

"How did you learn all this?" questioned Mr. Vaudrey, as a woman-servant came in to lay the supper cloth, and his wife collected her patches into a huge work-bag.

"Mrs. Marbury herself told me the last time she came to Spindleton for the fashions; not the time when she took Amabel home with her. She said she would have taken Rosa into her own work room, but the youngest apprentice had to run the errands and carry dresses home, and she could not find in her heart to send Mrs. Bateson's daughter to wait on people they had visited as equals. She asked me if I knew of a suitable situation away from Saltwych."

"So *you* offered to take the young lady as a *nurse?*"

"No, I did not, sir! There, baby's stirring," and a foot went on the rocker. "Nothing had turned up likely to suit Rosa when I wrote to ask Mrs. Marbury to find me a respectable nurse-maid for Bessy, and to my surprise she proposed that I should try Rosa Bateson, saying that the girl would prefer even service in a place where she was unknown. And that's all about it, James."

Miss Danvers, or Miss Jenny, as she was called, Mrs. Vaudrey's elder sister, a tall, kind, good-natured old maid, in a lace cap and spectacles, here came into the room, and after her Ann with a supper smoking hot.

"Where's Rosa?" was the question put to her.

"Where we ought all of us to be at this hour—in bed. Amabel wanted to sit up to see papa, but she dropped asleep before he came in. And I thought that after their tedious journey, first in Job Horne's shandra and then in the packet, bed was the best place for both of them. I'd an idea Rosa—by-the-way, her name is Rosaline—had a weary soul as well as a weary body; and it was certainly the best place for *her*. She may be fresher and more lively in the morning."

It was quite clear that Rosaline Bateson had not fallen into bad hands, although she had made a descent in the social scale, and was even then drenching her pillow with sorrowful tears.

CHAPTER II.

THE CHRISTENING.

Among the shopkeepers of Spindleton none were more respected or better connected than the Vaudreys. They belonged to that honourable class whose goods and whose word might be relied on. A large class then, a marvellously small one now, and narrowing year by year, as the distance widens between the consumer and the manufacturer, and the special dealer is giving place to the universal dealer; and the shopkeeper, who came in contact alike with the customer and the maker (or his traveller), is giving place to the unconcerned shopman, whose duty it is to sell off the worst goods first and for the best profit he can.

How they came to be shopkeepers affects not this story, but Mrs. Vaudrey—who had slipped into her position with more adaptability than her less flexible spouse—was wont to say they were the first retailers in either family. Indeed, a considerable flouncing of family pride hung around the active, talkative little woman's skirts, out of which had grown a horror of all that was mean or vulgar.

Picture her dismay when Miss Amabel—a damsel eight years old, fresh from her visit to Mrs. Marbury at Saltwych—bounced into the parlour the next morning at breakfast-time, dragging reluctant Rosaline after her, *sans ceremonie*, to be introduced to her papa, in the broadest of broad dialects and in the roughest manner.

"Oi say yo mun come in! Mamma, Rosa wunna come in, an' oi say she mun! Theere!" she cried, triumphantly, as Rosaline Bateson, pulled forward with a jerk, curtseyed in the doorway, blushing with shame and confusion.

Mamma set up her hands in genuine consternation. Was that the decorous little girl she had allowed Mrs. Marbury to carry away into Cheshire six months before for the benefit of her health? If six months in the country had so transformed her daughter, what might she not expect to find the nursemaid, born and reared

there? And if such were Rosa's speech and manner, how could she retain her?

She was not long in doubt. Whilst Amabel rushed round the table to embrace her papa, dragging the breakfast-cloth awry, and shaking the freshly-poured-out coffee from the cups, the new nursemaid, whose face was painfully flushed, faltered, in tones as pure as her own,

"Excuse me, Mrs. Vaudrey. Miss Amabel insisted on bringing me to see her papa."

She curtseyed again, and would have withdrawn had she not been called forward to take the baby, and to answer a kindly question or two respecting their previous day's journey, which her new master put to her, and which she answered with modesty and propriety, and with an inward shrinking of which they knew nothing.

"She'll do, poor lass!" was his mental comment.

"My mind's relieved," was that of Mrs. Vaudrey. "There is no danger of the children contracting vulgarity from Rosa. There is more hope that Amabel will refine under her influence. If her conduct equals her manner she will certainly be an acquisition. As for Amabel—it's dreadful!"

Poor Amabel! She had been petted and spoiled by Mrs. Marbury's aged father, allowed to run wild about the sleepy little town and the fields with a tribe of grandchildren, and whilst gathering health in their midst, had gathered also their rough manners and broad vernacular. She had come back a romp, to be rebuked by her mamma from hour to hour, and contrasted with her quiet, well-behaved brother Jack, as being "more boyish than the boy."

Mocked and mimicked whensoever she opened her lips, in spite of her disclaimer, "Grandfather Kimpton taught me to say it," she was glad to retreat to the old play-room which had been converted into a nursery, and give vent to her injured feelings there.

If she expected sympathy from Rosa, whose native dialect was being impeached in her small person, she soon discovered her error.

"My dear," said Rosa, on one of these occasions, "no good little girl would say, 'Oi conna,' and 'I wunna,' and 'Yo shanna ma' me!' to her mamma. It is disobedient as well as impolite."

"Grandfather Kimpton gave me a penny and a cake to say it to Aunt Marbury," sobbed Amabel.

"No matter, my dear; you grieve your dear mamma when you say it, and some day, when it is too late, you may be sorry you ever gave her pain in any way," the deep sigh which accompanied this, and the tears in Rosa's mournful eyes, serving to point her speech.

Amabel's glance followed the moist eyes to the black frock she wore, remembered that Rosa had no mamma, and stealing an arm round the nurse's neck, whispered, with a kiss, "I *will* try to please mamma, Rosa! But, oh, it *is* so hard."

At all events Amabel was safe from taunts and mockery with Rosa, who much of her time seemed lost in thought; and it is certain the grave melancholy of her demeanour and her softly-modulated tones did somewhat towards toning down the rough speech and manner of the tomboy: as certain, too, that as time went by the purity and dignity of her character helped to form, and mould, and strengthen that of the impressionable youngster.

Rosaline—or Rosa, as she was now called—had been quite a fortnight in her situation, and had passed the painful ordeal of examination and criticism from Mrs. Vaudrey's married sisters (who, being older, assumed the right of dictatorship in matters domestic) before her mistress was pronounced strong enough to resume her position as head of affairs in Newmarket Street, since that involved going to and fro morning and night, and separation from the baby: the wonderful and marvellous baby, whose beauty was undeniable, and extolled by wiseacres to the disparagement of those who had outgrown babyhood, and also to their consequent discomfort.

In that fortnight two events occurred. Miss Amabel was packed off to her former day-school along with Jack, two years her junior, and baby Bessy was christened, with as much attendant festivity as if she had been born with the proverbial silver spoon in her mouth, and all the old family honours thick upon her. True, she was a baby among babies; one of those whom people stopped in the streets to admire; one too supremely lovely to be put off with an ordinary celebration. "Your nose is put out of joint," had been Ann's first intimation to Jack, and the same announcement was made to Amabel immediately on her return home, a declaration the young miss (whose nose was

something of a snub) resented with much vehemence, and an immediate examination of the maligned organ with a small thin hand before the nearest looking-glass. Explanation did not much mend matters. Aunts and uncles repeated the phrase, whilst caressing and admiring the new arrival, until the beautiful baby began to be regarded as an interloper.

For the small gratification of seeing how Jack and Amabel bore the idea of their dethronement, Ann and Bridget made the most of the coming christening "all in honour of the new baby! There was no such fuss made over either of you; Bessy's to be the queen of the house!" and so on, until they roused temper, which ended in tears and an appeal to Rosa.

She comforted the tantalized little ones to the best of her ability; soothing their irritation with the assurance that Ann and Bridget were "only joking," that it was not true, that "all little babies had to have more care taken of them because they were small and helpless and unable to help themselves, and could not play or run about," and that she "did not think either Ann or Bridget had been there to see their christenings," and much to the same purport.

Moreover, though with some timidity, she ventured to remonstrate with the two women on the danger of setting the elder children against the young one, only to be answered impertinently, "It's like your impudence to come dictating to us. Keep to your own place, my fine lady, and don't come meddling in ours," and she found that she had only made two unfriends —and done no good.

Miss Danvers had initiated Rosa in her duties on her first arrival, well pleased with her modest confession, "I know nothing of children, Miss Jenny, but I am desirous to learn and to do my best." Yet her ten days' probation had not removed her personal sense of awkwardness and unskilfulness when the important christening-day arrived. And there were unsubdued memories and a leaven of pride to arouse a painful contrast between the past and present, until she scarcely knew whether to be more sad or grateful for the new *coloured* dress provided for her wear, in lieu of her own mourning, black being deemed unlucky on such an occasion. She felt as if the neat buff print was a badge of servitude, inasmuch as it seemed to ignore her personal bereavement; and her first emotion was regret that she had left Saltwych. "No one there thought my mourning out of

place on any occasion, and there my mother and father were known," she said to herself, with a sigh. "Was it right to come here as a common servant?"

On second thought a deep flush crimsoned her face and neck, as she admitted to herself, "Yes, yes; it was, it must be for the best! Mrs. Marbury was right. *He* is not likely to look for me, or follow me here; and if I am reduced I can preserve my self-respect even as a servant," from which it may be inferred Mrs. Marbury had some motive for sending Rosaline Bateson away which had not been communicated to the Vaudreys; and that there was some undesirable *he* in the background.

All the week preparations had been going on. Fresh stores of glass and china had come into the house or out of closets; there had been polishing of plate and furniture, the concoction of jellies and pastry, stuffing and trussing of poultry; and on the day itself such a roasting and boiling, and decanting of wine and spirits, as tested the whole resources of the establishment, Miss Danvers being the active directress of all but the shop, of which Mrs. Vaudrey took charge.

It appeared to Amabel as if her mamma devoted the whole morning not occupied by customers to lecturing and instructing her in deportment and behaviour, and it was quite a relief to her young mind to be told it was time she went to Rosa to be dressed. Jack was already casting the chrysalis slough to come forth a butterfly.

The dressing process in the nursery was yet incomplete when mamma, stylishly arrayed in sea-green silk, with a bonnet of lace and marabout feathers, came in to add a few finishing touches to the bow of Miss's pink sash and the tucks of her white frock, to the frill round the neck of Master Jack's blue velvet pelisse, and the fit of his white trousers, before dismissing them with extra admonitions to sit still with their hands folded before them, in the drawing-room, until the company came. There, when the sponsors arrived, the boy and girl were found occupying footstools on each side the fireplace in firm silence, their hands folded in their laps, only speaking when spoken to, and watching bashful Rosa as she quietly held up the beautiful baby in its long white robes to be admired, and blushed at every sentence addressed to her. Nor were they released when, the baby having been sufficiently admired and caressed, Miss Boyle, one of the godmothers, relieved Rosa

of her burden, and the party set off in a coach to the parish church; the last charge to Rosa being that she was to keep the children in good order.

But Rosa herself was called away—requisitioned to make herself useful in laying the cloth in the back parlour for the late dinner.

This said late dinner had disorganised the whole domestic machine. The children's ordinary meal times had been grievously overlooked. Miss Amabel's country appetite became imperative. She left the seat where she had been doing polite penance, and ran downstairs towards the kitchen "for something to eat."

At that moment, Ann, the big cook, who happened to be near-sighted, came out of the kitchen with a large saucepan of hot water, intending to utilise the parlour fire for boiling vegetables. It was growing dusk, the back lobby was never very light, the saucepan and Amabel came into collision, and the contents went streaming over the child's bare neck and arms.

As she ran screaming into the kitchen, much-flurried Biddy, with a quick "Get out o' this," intensified her pain with a smart slap on the scalded arm, before Rosa, who had witnessed the accident, could interpose.

The next minute Aunt Jenny had Amabel in her lap and was stripping off the drenched white frock, whilst Rosa hurried for old linen and vinegar, obedient to orders, her pale face paler than ever. Had not the children been left in her charge? Was not she to blame for this? She was in great trouble, the more so because the child had won upon her, even before they left Saltwych together.

Miss Jenny blamed Ann and Biddy both. The former, with an air of injured integrity, cried, "What call had th' lass t' run again th' saucepan? 'Twere her own doin', I say;" and was in the high stilts all the day afterwards; whilst poor, hasty Biddy was loud in lamentation of her own "mistake."

"Sure an' 'twas my own ill luck! Whin did I iver slap little missy before or since? An' howly St. Pether! to think I should do it this wonst, at all, at all!"

"I am very sorry indeed, Miss Jane," said Rosa, apologetically, as she saturated with vinegar the linen rags for application to Amabel, now in her nursery bed; "but I am afraid it was my fault. Amabel had told me she was hungry. I should have

attended to her wants myself. I hope Mrs. Vaudrey will not send me away for my negligence."

"I—it was—s—n't y—you; it w-was Ann," sobbed out Amabel from her pillow, as Miss Danvers looked up at the apologist with kindly eyes, saying, "Send you away, Rosa? No servant was ever dismissed from this house, except for wilful or culpable ill-doing. You could not do two things at once. Come downstairs now, and I will give you some cake for the child. She will be better soon, I hope. It is a sad mischance.—But such gay doings often do involve disasters," she murmured to herself, as if she had small zest for "such gay doings." Indeed, how should she have, seeing the extra trouble and anxiety the preparations brought on her?

"Poor, dear Amabel!" murmured Rosa, as she put the slice of cake into the unscalded hand. "Do not cry; it makes my heart ache to see you in pain." A tear fell like healing balm on the little heated brow as a kiss was pressed on the sobbing lips,—and the child was comforted, if the pain was not allayed.

Not so Rosa. The day's mischances and annoyances were not over, and it was sad for her throughout. With sensitive memories of her own home and with a retiring delicacy which was certainly innate, she shrank from the prominence into which she was brought and from contact with coarser natures.

As baby Bessy was brought back from church, and handed over to her, fresh visitors arrived.

There was an influx of Mrs. Vaudrey's married sisters and intimate friends into the nursery, where Rosa had to undergo a fire of cross-questions relative to her own antecedents equally with Amabel's accident. She answered respectfully, though with a shrinking reserve, as a rebellious something bubbled up into her throat, and would not be kept down.

Again she was required to exhibit the wonderful baby to strangers and gentlemen in the drawing-room, where she underwent a scrutiny as close as the newly-made Christian. Once or twice her eyes and ears encountered a visible stare, or an open expression of admiration, which set the sensitive ears of Rosa in a tingle, her downcast lids and flushing brow bearing witness to her pain. Fifty years since there was less refinement and delicacy where women were concerned, and many men thought it a fine thing to make a pretty girl blush with—aye, outraged modesty.

How thankful was she when the signal for dinner permitted her escape to the nursery, and to her own sad ruminations, interrupted though they were by Amabel's weary expressions of pain, and Bessy crying to be fed, and no mamma there to feed her, the festivities going on as if no one had an ache or a pain in the world; least of all under that roof.

At length the great dinner of many courses was over, and the ladies retired. Master Jack, allowed to put in an appearance with the dessert, and to drink his baby-sister's health in half a glass of wine, "like a man," contrived to linger behind with the gentlemen. And when the ladies passed the door of the silent nursery on their way to the drawing-room, in animated converse, Rosa was fortunately unconscious that she was their theme.

The outspoken question, "Vaudrey, where did you pick up that pretty nursemaid?" had been put across the table and the decanters, when the ladies were gone, by the godfather—a bewhiskered individual named Waters, who owned to "a weakness for pretty faces." This had been supplemented by a younger man—a Mr. Bowford—who added, "Bashful as well as pretty, sir." And Mr. Vaudrey had given such an answer as he hoped would check any approach to familiarity and assure the orphaned girl the respect she and her misfortunes merited.

Among the feminine tongues in the drawing-room, where the same subject had been introduced, the conversation tended to controversy, Rosa's good looks and her unconsciousness of them finding some few supporters beyond Mrs. Vaudrey and Miss Boyle. Mrs. Waters, however, an imbecility of a woman, at all times jealous of anyone pretty as herself, went so far as to say, "She is neither so handsome nor so bashful as some people seem to think; and I am afraid Mrs. Vaudrey will find her mistake out before long, though the girl does look as mournful as a mute."

"And as pale as paste," added a remarkably rosy-cheeked Miss Fisher, who was supposed to be angling for Mr. Bowford. "I quite agree with you, Mrs. Waters—the girl is only artful and demure. Did you see how she reddened if a gentleman did but glance towards her? As if she were too good to be looked at, forsooth!"

Mrs. Vaudrey was annoyed, and so was Miss Boyle. The

latter had a spice of sarcasm in her composition. She could not forbear saying, with quiet point, "Dear me! *Are* red cheeks artful, Miss Fisher? I was not aware of it!" which, somehow, set the ruddy cheeks still more aflame.

"I think, ladies," said Miss Jenny, fresh from a hasty toilette, with very unusual severity, "the Christian ceremony of the day might have suggested worthier matter for conversation than backbiting a poo——"

Backbiting in the drawing-room and reverie in the nursery were alike broken in upon by a sharp cry, a rolling fall downstairs, and a general commotion.

CHAPTER III.

MISCHIEF AND MELANCHOLY.

Miss Danvers was out of the room in an instant, and not she alone, for when Mrs. Vaudrey would have followed, she found Mrs. Waters and Miss Fisher before her on the stair-head craning their necks over the balustrade in eager curiosity.

The nursery door opposite, across the half-way landing, was open, and on the lowest stair of the longer flight stood Rosa with her back towards them, stooping over something on the hall mat at the foot, round which a crowd from the adjacent dining-room was gathering. It was Master Jack, who lay there in a senseless heap, too heavy for Rosa's slender arms to lift; and bending over both, his bushy whiskers unpleasantly close to her shrinking head, was Mr. Waters, who apparently had not spared the wine. But at the time when to be "a three-bottle man" was a boast, that was not much.

He was saying in tones meant to be paternal, "My dear, let me assist you," when a younger and steadier arm and voice interposed with a respectful "Permit *me*. I hope the little fellow is not much hurt;" and Mr. Bowford, who had thus pressed forward in a double sense to the relief of Rosa, lifted the boy from the floor.

A spasmodic "Oh!" from above, which seemed to have an echo in a fainter key, drowned the low-voiced "Thank you, sir," of Rosa. There was a sharp cry of acute distress from Mrs. Vaudrey, and, as the boy's face was turned upwards to the light of the swing lamp in the hall, Rosa saw with alarm, which shut out all other impressions, that his eyes were closedand he helpless.

In another moment Mr. Vaudrey had taken the limp form into his fatherly arms, and Miss Jenny had pressed to the front ready for any emergency. She was a woman whose presence of mind rarely forsook her; of strong good sense, a valuable aid in all such cases of domestic disaster. Her emotions did not lie on the surface.

"Bring him into the kitchen, James," said she, "and then

take Emilia and the rest out of the way. Rosa can do all I want."

Others might retire, and did, but the loving mother would not be kept back with her son lying as if dead across her ever efficient sister's lap. She stood there with clasped hands, trembling with nervous agitation—and utterly *helpless*. Much more helpless than unskilled Rosa, who was as ready to remove Jack's frill, loosen the collar of his velvet pelisse, and to run for "vinegar and brown paper," as was "Jenny, the maid" mythical of the old nursery rhyme.

For, although stunned, Jack was *not dead*, and he had no broken limbs. The "vinegar and brown paper" were simply required to plaister an unwonted protuberance on his forehead. His only material injury was from *wine!*

It turned out that Mr. Waters and an uncle Blabroo, equally indiscreet, had, unobserved by Mr. Vaudrey, supplemented the half glass given in honour of the occasion with sundry little sips, and pats on the back because he "drank it like a man," until something potential, besides his father's command, warned Master Jack to retreat.

He had managed to reach the stairs, and, by grasping the balustrades, to mount the first flight midway, but the steps seemed to slip from beneath his feet, and whilst he was thinking his own head a humming-top, *he*, and *not* the stairs, had slipped in reality.

The nursery was a long room in the rear of the house over the kitchen, overlooking a high wall and the corresponding windows of the next door neighbour beyond, having a fireplace at the extreme end opposite to the door, which opened to the staircase between the ground-floor and the drawing-room. Thither tipsy little Jack was carried to sleep off his stupefaction, and awaken in the morning to a consciousness of headache, sore limbs and brow, a nauseous dose of physic, and a succession of admonitory lectures not more palatable.

Meanwhile Rosa was left in charge of the little ones, thankful to be so left. And between the feeding, nursing, and undressing of baby Bessy, who was inclined to be fractious; the soothing of scalded Amabel's pain, mental and bodily, by whispered words and a renewal of cooling vinegar-cloths (vinegar or, properly speaking, alegar, and goose-oil were time-honoured remedies in old-fashioned households); the covering and re-cover-

ing of restless Jack, who tossed about in uneasy slumber, she had not much leisure for thoughts of self or anything but her pressing duties; and the sounds of passing feet on the stairs, the hum of voices, whether in song or conversation, even the echoes of laughter, only made her more glad to be alone; although her reflections were none of the most agreeable.

Proud and sensitive to a fault, she had been annoyed by the catechism and scrutiny of strangers during the day, especially with the easy familiarity of Mr. Waters, and she had charged her altered position with all that was so new to her. And trying, as she did, to school herself into submission to her lot, against which her proud nature rose in rebellion, she might have dismissed the matter as one of the inevitable evils of servitude had not chattering Ann brought into the nursery along with the tea-tray a something which took away poor Rosa's appetite.

Ann had been four years with her mistress, had seen nurse girls come and nurse girls go, but to none of these had a nursery been assigned. And when, with the best and most considerate of motives, a room was set apart for the new maid and the children, the act was resented in the kitchen as a personal affront. Only the better class manufacturers held a nursery to be a necessity for their children; to the shopkeepers it was clearly a luxurious superfluity. Family and nurse were alike voted "stuck-up," and displeasure was shown in many small ways. The new dress given to Rosa had spoiled the tempers of Ann and Bridget for the day. "What was she better than they? and no new dresses had been given to them, old and faithful servants as they had been." If Ann had drenched herself with the hot water she poured over Amabel she could not have smarted more than she did under the mild reproof of Miss Jenny. It was as the last cut of a whip on a raw spot. She was not naturally ill-disposed, but in her irritation it was some satisfaction to turn the tables on the more favoured dependent.

"Well, my fine lady, I hope you've done mischief enough for one day! Mistress is rare an' angry. Had you looked after them children, yon lass had ne'er ha' bin scalded, nor the lad tumbled downstairs. An' now for all your quiet ways and looks you've made a pretty mess, an' well-nigh spoiled the pleasure of the whole party."

This was Ann's brusque address to Rosa as she set down

the long-delayed refreshment tray with a clatter which woke the baby, and in answer to the girl's open-eyed wonder, she blurted out with equal disregard to the other's feelings and to veracity :

"Aye, you may stare; but theere's bin Mrs. Waters in hysterics, and Miss Fisher all in a tremble, holding a smelling bottle to her nose, and all through you. *They* were watching you from the landing when you had all the gentlemen round you, and Mr. Waters and Mr. Bowford *my dear*-ing you like anything. It's plain to see you've set up a coolness between Miss Fisher and her sweetheart, with your sly ways and downcast looks, and if them Waterses don't quarrel all the way home my name's not Ann Bounce."

She did not say that Mrs. Waters was a fanciful simpleton who went into hysterics on any or no occasion, or that Miss Fisher baited her golden hook occasionally with an icicle, or that Rosa's propriety of conduct and demeanour had been fully vindicated and her sorrowful history told before the assembled guests; she only added a few pungent details, winding up with, "An' it's all your doing, Miss Rosa!" The "Miss" being prefixed, not as a compliment by any means.

All *her* doing? Rosa sighed as she sent away her tea almost untasted. Another girl might have argued or wept out her disclaimer. She was too proud for that, but the pain was deeper. Ann carried away the tray, but she could not carry away the sense of shame and humiliation which had fallen upon the orphan girl. She had gone with the wilful intention of "mortifying the pride of a stuck-up madam," and she had done more than she meant or could have understood. Delicacy was not the tenet of her faith, or her class.

Rosa took herself to task, wondered what she had said or done to cause such a tumult or to set people against her, and she shrank within herself as she reviewed the harsh judgment of Mrs. Waters and her friend. As she walked about the room with restless Bessy, the hardship of her lot seemed to press heavier and heavier upon her. The secret poverty endured whilst her mother lay dying was as nothing to it. "Would it be always thus? Was Edda likely to suffer as she was suffering? Would she be made to feel her dependence so severely? Was there no escape from the imputation, the humiliation?" she asked herself again and again, and as she paced the long room

with baby Bessy in her weary arms, a morbid, melancholy sense of hopeless degradation took possession of her. There was no bridge to recross the gulf between Miss Rosaline Bateson, of Wych-Mount, and Rosa, the Spindleton shopkeeper's nursemaid.

From a restless pillow and unhealthy dreams Rosa awaked the next morning, listless and unrefreshed. The after-party bustle in the house did not rouse her. The unwonted tediousness of the children did not disturb her. If she was sad before she was sombre now. Even Master Jack observed the shade on her expressive countenance, and, sidling up to her, asked if she was "being sorry because he had been so naughty."

She looked at him for a moment, as if scarcely comprehending his question; then, with one of the sighs which were becoming so frequent, said, "Sorry, Jack, oh, yes, yes—we are all sorry to think our good little boy should so much misbehave himself. But Jack will never be so naughty as to drink so much wine again, I hope."

"Oh, never, Rosy, if it makes you so sorry—so very sorry. *I* am very sorry too, and my head does so ache!"

But no penitence of Master Jack's either cured his headache or her heartache.

From the first she had shown a desire to learn, and to oblige, and to make herself useful; had offered to knit socks for the little ones in her spare hours, and was *beginning* to take an interest in lessons and games before that unlucky christening party. Now that was over. She did not fail in any given duty, but she went about her tasks without soul or spirit, seemed to shrink within herself when spoken to, and rarely spoke herself when not addressed. The knitting-needles had no longer the sharp metallic click of pleasant occupation. Indeed, her work was apt to drop into her lap, and lie there disregarded, as baby Bessy did when quietly disposed.

Ann and Biddy were quick to observe the change, and spoke of her contemptuously as "Molly Mopes."

Mrs. Vaudrey had resumed her place in the business; Amabel and Jack went off to school again, not much the worse for their mishaps, and twice each week-day, weather permitting, Rosa was required to carry Bessy, in a long blue cloak, bordered with swansdown, to the mother in the Newmarket Street establishment.

One might have expected a young girl fresh from the country

to be attracted by the shops in that busy thoroughfare, with the throng of vehicles and well-dressed pedestrians; but, strangely enough, after a few days she sought out the less-frequented bye-streets, where she could take her way unobserved.

Something of wounded pride, no doubt, there was in this, something of growing despondency; but something, too, of genuine modesty, which shrank from the public gaze, all the more since the note of alarm sounded by Ann, and another note of alarm, which Mrs. Marbury would have held to be good and sufficient.

One day her course was arrested by an elderly lady, who, attracted by the bright cloak, asked to look at the baby, and, professing herself struck by its remarkable loveliness, announced herself as Mrs. Ashworth, the wife of a physician in the neighbourhood well known to her master and mistress, and begged that Rosa would accompany her home that the doctor might have a peep at her charge. Rosa hesitated only a moment; she had seen the old lady in the Older Street shop through the glass door, and did not like to refuse. It was not far to Queen Street.

The doctor was in his study.

Rosa was left barely a moment in the hall before the doctor's wife called her into the shady room, and taking baby from her arms presented it to the doctor, whose eyes had settled, but kindly, on the face of the nurse as she entered.

"Is she not beautiful?" asked the old lady, triumphantly.

He lowered his eyes to the infant.

"*Very!*" said he, with quiet emphasis, touching the baby's dimpled chin. "I hope she will not be spoiled."

A glass of home-made wine and a biscuit were pressed on Rosa whilst Bessy was caressed and admired, and after a little conversation, and a message of congratulation for Mrs. Vaudrey, they were allowed to depart, Rosa having no suspicion that she had been borne there for the doctor's personal inspection quite as much as the wonderful baby.

The door had closed behind her; she began to descend the broad steep flight of steps. Another foot paused on the lowest step of the ascent. A pair of long limbs caught her eye, a fashionable riding suit, then a familiar face, on which sat the unmistakable stare of gratified astonishment.

"Rosa Bateson, as I'm a living man!" was ejaculated in an underbreath, and a hand was put forth as if for her to take. But,

without a word, she brushed past the speaker ere he could bar her passage, and was half across the street before he had recovered from his bewilderment.

The long legs were after her in a trice; but she ran rather than walked, scarcely feeling the burden in her arms, as he huddled question upon question, to learn if possible why she had left Saltwych, where and with whom she was living, and her errand to his uncle, Doctor Ashworth.

Not a reply did he get beyond the one remonstrance, "Mr. Freeland, I beg you will not follow me!"—which she might have addressed to the winds. He was determined to see her home, he said.

At once she turned to the left, instead of the right, and up a narrow street, with the twofold purpose of escape from observation and future pursuit. Again she turned, this time into a dingy street which had no apparent outlet save a narrow tunnel right ahead: and with a smile he slackened his pace.

Suddenly she darted towards a side door in a blank wall half-hid by a projecting building; the door opened to the touch; it was closed as quickly, and her pursuer heard a bolt grate in the staple as he reached it.

She was in a long narrow entry between high walls, with a similar door at the extreme end, an entry common to five or six houses, of which Vaudrey's was the last.

Here she rested to recover breath and composure before she lifted the latch and opened the yard-door, to take her fellow-servants by surprise.

The yard was paved with large pebbles. Eight or ten sharply angular stone steps lay between her and the kitchen door. With a bucket of water by her side, swaying to and fro with the energetic sweep she gave the cleansing mop-rag, knelt Ann washing them down. Biddy was polishing the large kitchen window inside. Ann, singing over her work, had not heard the approach of Rosa, who stood there waiting until there was room for her to pass.

A sign from Biddy caused Ann to turn sharply and rise to her feet. With one hand on her hip, and her dripping mop-rag in the other, she opened her eyes and her mouth wide, and after a moment's stare at Rosa, demanded brusquely,

"Why, what's takken thee, wench, that thah comes round the back way? I'd ha' thought that long dirty entry wer too fow

for thi dainty feet. Hast'a had a hint that th' front dur wer for thi betters? But what's the matter wi' thee? Thah looks as if thah might ha' seen a boggart. An 'neaw thi face is as red as a radish."

"There is nothing the matter," answered Rosa with an effort, but her catching breath and changing colour belied her. The long run with the infant in her arms, added to excitement, had been too much for her, and no sooner did she reach the kitchen than she dropped into the nearest chair in a sort of swoon.

Miss Jenny was called; and when Rosa had somewhat revived, she excused her faintness on the ground that having gone out of the way to Queen Street with the doctor's wife, she had hurried home lest she should be late.

The excuse seemed reasonable to simple-minded Miss Danvers.

The servant women were not so easily satisfied.

"In a hurry, and came all the way round by the entry," said Ann. "I say, my fine lady, that tale may serve wi' some folk, but me an' Biddy can put two an' two together. You re none so fond of cleaning your dirty shoes as to trail them up that miry entry for nowt. It's more like you've picked up a sweetheart on the sly, for all your quiet ways; or mebbe your folk sent you away from some chap as has come after you. It's like enough, and that's why you're so moped and malancholy. But you'd best be careful, Molly Mopes, for if our folk find you out they'll send you packing in no time: they was rare an' angry afore."

What could Rosa say to this woman who had hit the mark so closely with her chance shot?

She could only gasp in pain, whilst her colour came and went, "Sweetheart! What do you mean? I have no sweetheart! I am too young for sweethearts."

"Shure an' there's no harum in a swateheart, my lass," put in Biddy, condescendingly, "if it's all fair an' open like, an' not mystairious or——"

Rosa's pride came to her aid. She answered with something like scorn,

"Those who were my equals are above me now, and would not stoop to me. I can have no sweethearts on my present level, for they would be beneath me!"

"Heyday!" cried Ann, as Rosa gathered up the child in her arms and moved away, cut to the soul, "Molly Mopes has found

her tongue. It's much if your pride hasna a take-down afore long," she called after her.—She had no friends in the kitchen.

In Mr. Freeland, Rosa had recognised a wild young fellow, the terror of half the respectable girls in Saltwych.

His father's estate lay but a few miles away. He rode into the little town, put up at the Dragon, then a great coaching house with large stabling, and unfortunately close to Mrs. Marbury's. His first glance at Rosa in her black dress had been enough. Her defenceless position was well known, and should have been her shield. To him it was otherwise.

Taking advantage of her youth and her loneliness, he followed her whithersoever she went, until she felt constrained to tell Mrs. Marbury of his persecutions, and to beg that she might be sent away—anywhere out of his reach where she might maintain herself independently, if it were only into domestic service. She had felt his attentions an insult.

His appearance on Dr. Ashworth's steps was another drop in her cup of bitterness. She argued that he would be sure to find her out, and if seen with him she might lose even the friends who had taken her in. She had no idea how individuals are lost in a large town.

At all events she was half afraid to be seen out of doors; went on her daily errands with Bessy through the byeways; and indoors lost herself in retrospective abstraction, when not actively employed.

The united cares of shopkeeping and housekeeping did not leave Miss Jenny Danvers much leisure for repeated visits to the nursery, and the habitual melancholy of Rosa did not strike her. She found the girl open to instruction, respectful and obedient to orders. Jack and Amabel made no complaints, the nursery seemed to keep the house quiet, and so far all was well; for neither did Rosa complain.

But one morning she chanced to overhear Ann say to Biddy whilst waxing the oil-cloth in the lobby,

"A pratty nurse that Molly Mopes is for a babby! Give me a lass with some life in her. A dull nurse makes a dull babe. And there she sits with Bess on her lap and never so much as opens her lips to say a word to the chilt, or even to smile in its sweet little face. I've no notion of your stuck-up dolls!"

"Oh, indeed!" said Miss Jenny to herself; "we must remedy that. No doubt the girl is dull and solitary, sitting up there

with nothing but walls and back yards to replace the fields and foliage around her own home; with no one to speak to but the children."

So in the afternoon Rosa was told she might bring the baby into the parlour whilst the other children were at school. "You will find it more lively here than upstairs, Rosa, and we wish you to be comfortable." "Thank you, Miss Jenny," said the girl, a faint tinge rising on her cheek; and baby evincing a disposition to cry, she began to pace the room, monotonously patting its back as a pacificator; casting an occasional glance towards the glass door through which Miss Jenny had vanished to serve a customer.

"You need not walk about so much with Bessy, you will weary yourself and teach the little darling bad habits," said Miss Jenny on her return, taking the infant in her own arms, and making a playful demonstration for its amusement.

Rosa stood there waiting, but without a word even to the child.

"Which do you like best, Rosa—the town or country?" asked Miss Jenny, to draw her out.

"The country, ma'am," was answered with a sigh.

"I suppose you had a large garden at Wych-Mount?"

A still heavier sigh heralded the brief reply, "Yes, ma'am, and an orchard."

"Do you know many people in Saltwych?"

Rosa's face flushed, then paled. "We did know some of the best families;—but—but, when my father was unfortunate they forgot us. I know only Mrs. Marbury there now, and Dr. Lindop," and again was heard the inevitable sigh.

"Um!" thought Miss Jenny, "this will never do. Ann was right," but she continued talking to Rosa about various matters, whilst she herself warmed baby's little toes by the fire, and treated it to an occasional burst of nursery nonsense, until customers called her away, and she handed the laughing little one back to its nurse.

Returning in some fifteen minutes, she found the girl looking into the fire vacantly, dreamily shaking the child's coral and bells to keep it quiet on her knee.

"This will never do!" repeated Miss Danvers to herself, but only to herself, intending to wait the result of her experiment.

There was plenty of life in that back parlour. Besides the succession of customers in the shop, there was a frequent influx of callers, some of whom merely said "How do you do?" and were off again; others who came to chat with Miss Danvers, or to talk politics with Mr. Vaudrey if he chanced to be there, too free and easy to take further note of Rosa than a casual glance.

The girl would rise to retire on their entrance, as if she felt that was not her place, unless Miss Danvers made a sign for her to remain; but whether she came or went, or whether she was taken by surprise in the nursery, the same settled melancholy was apparent.

At length Miss Jenny spoke. It was in the nursery one evening, after Jack and Amabel were in bed, and baby lay in her cradle. She had found the girl knitting slowly and mechanically in front of the fire, sighing heavily, and too much lost in thought to hear the door-handle or the footstep.

"Rosa," said Miss Jenny, kindly, "are you unhappy here?"

"No, ma'am," she answered quietly, with a contradictory sigh.

"Because," continued the good creature, "if you are not comfortable, do you not think we had better send you home again?"

"*Home* again!" the girl echoed, in a tone which, like the sad eloquence of her large lustrous eyes, went straight to the dear old maid's soft heart. "*I have no home!*—no home but this, and if you send me away——"

The sentence remained unfinished, save with a sob and choke.

"Poor child," interrupted Miss Jane, "we are not likely to send you away without sufficient reason, but we like to see people around us cheerful and happy, and you appear to be miserable. Would you prefer to spend your evenings in the kitchen with Ann and Bridget for companionship?"

Rosa shook her head with a slight shudder of repugnance.

"No, thank you; I would rather sit here. But, oh, Miss Jenny, I hope you and Mrs. Vaudrey are not angry with me again. I'm afraid I am not a good nurse; but when I do wrong, you would only tell——"

"Angry with you, and *again!* What do you mean? Who said we were angry?"

There was no answer, save a flush which mounted to the girl's temples. She could not stoop to tell tales.

Miss Jenny was observant. "We have been sorry for you,

my dear, not angry," she said, gently, and went straightway downstairs to ask an important question or two, both in the kitchen and parlour, and to set the wrong right, if possible.

"Who has been reporting to Rosa that we are angry and dissatisfied with her?" was the question she put to the two women seated sewing at a little round table near the fire, the supper tray being laid in readiness on the dresser. "Who has said that we were likely to send her away?"

"Oh! she's been telling tales, has she?" jerked out Ann, off her guard.

"No! *you* have just told your own tale; Rosa has said *nothing*. She only kept silent when I knew there was something to tell."

"Shure an' if she kept silent it's only guessing you are," put in Biddy, with quite a knowing look.

"I am not guessing. People with loud voices should be sure that the parlour door is shut before they gossip about Molly Mopes in the hall, or fling abuse after her from the kitchen."

Ann and Bridget exchanged glances. They were caught in their own trap.

Ann attempted exculpation. "Well, she is a Molly Mopes, and she has th' pride o' Loosiver into th' bargain."

"If you mean by the pride of Lucifer that she cannot forget that she was born and reared as a *lady*, and has the pride to keep herself respected, you may be right, Ann. But," Miss Danvers went on, "I am here to ask from you what you have said to Rosa that should make her *mope?* Why and when you said that her mistress was angry with her? And what rude thing you had said to call up her pride the day she fainted? The girl has neither father nor mother, and it is our duty to see she is not made miserable. And unless you do answer my questions honestly, it is not likely either of *you* will remain under this roof much longer."

Of all yielding, good-natured beings, Miss Jenny was supposed to be the most cushiony.

Had a lamb developed into a lion they could scarcely have been taken more by surprise.

Without intending to confess or apologise, the two women did pretty much of both, and then Miss Jenny went into the parlour, along with the retarded supper, to make a report and ask what was best to be done.

CHAPTER IV.

PROMOTED.

A WEEK or so later, Mrs. Waters and her inseparable friend, Miss Fisher, walking briskly up Older Street to keep themselves warm, encountered a sturdy lass they had often seen hanging about, with the unmistakable blue cloak of Bessy Vaudrey in her arms and Bessy snug within it.

Before they recovered from their surprise, the girl (Hetty Smith, the daughter of a pewterer who occupied one of the area shops, then common in Spindleton) had passed them, and was too far down the street for question.

"Ah!" exclaimed Mrs. Waters, "I knew Mrs. Vaudrey would not keep that other creature long. I heard that gentlemen stopped and spoke to her as she went down Newmarket Street with the child in her arms. Mr. Bowford was one of them, and that wild nephew of Dr. Ashworth, from Saltwych, another and Waters did it once; but I soon put a stop to *that*."

We know that Rosa herself had put a stop to it by taking a less-frequented route, but she knew it not.

"Well, I did not see much in the girl myself; *I* thought her stupid and awkward. She could not answer the most simple question without reddening to the very ears. But men will be foolish, and think nothing of it," added Miss Fisher, following Mrs. Waters up the three wide steps to the shop over which Miss Danvers presided.

Miss Jenny, matching some purse-silk for a lady, just gave them a nod of recognition, which they returned; the shopboy lifted a trap in the counter for the ladies to pass through, and, turning the handle of the glass door communicating with the parlour, they walked in. After depositing their big muffs on the table, they took up their station on the hearthrug, in order to consult the broad, low chimney-glass, re-arrange stray curls, with which the wind had made too free, and bask comfortably in the warmth of the fire at the same time.

Presently they were joined by Miss Jenny, who came in

rubbing her chilled hands together and saying, with her pleasant smile,

"Seasonable weather this! I hope you are both well, and enjoy it; you look blooming."

She had no intention to perpetrate a pun, or to wound Miss Fisher's feelings, but really the young lady's "cheeks were more blue than blooming, when they came fresh from the open air," as Mrs. Waters was thoughtless enough to say, with a laugh at her young friend's expense. But Mrs. Waters was not very sensitive, except where her own self was concerned.

Then, as she seated herself comfortably, and Miss Jenny went to the cellaret for refreshments, she began:

"Well, I see you have got a fresh nurse; a girl who seems to know how to handle a child. I thought you would soon get rid of the dainty miss you had at the christening. Both Lucy Fisher and I said you would find your mistake out before long."

"Yes, we found our mistake out, Mrs. Waters," said Miss Jenny, calmly. "She was quite unfitted for a nurse in a tradesman's family. We required someone who could associate with the other servants on their own level, and so we have taken Rosa behind the counter."

"You have done what?" cried Mrs. Waters, afraid to credit her own ears.

"Behind the counter! Here?" broke from Miss Fisher.

"No, at the other shop. Emilia has for some time wanted an assistant, partly to relieve Mr. Vaudrey, and enable him to give a little more time here. Rosa acquits herself very well, I am told."

The visitors nibbled their cake, and the pretty matron, with a smile meant to be significant, remarked,

"I suppose it was Mr. Vaudrey's suggestion?"

"Oh, dear, no. It was chiefly my idea. I thought we had no right to shut such a girl up in a dreary nursery, above the servants and below ourselves, to pine away with melancholy, and so——"

"I heard from Mrs. Blabroo that you allowed her to sit with you in the parlour; I suppose that was the reason," suggested blooming Miss Fisher.

"Partly."

"Ah, the girl played her cards well. We said she was artful, and now I am sure of it. What say you, Lucy?" quoth Mrs. W.

Lucy's assent was lost in the entrance of Miss Boyle, Bessy's

godmother, with Amabel and Jack at her heels, the former bearing a flaxen-haired doll in a robe of tissue paper, the latter encumbered with a Noah's Ark almost too large for his little arms, quite too big for his politeness, since it had nearly gone to the floor in his struggle to remove his peaked cap and make a bow to the ladies.

Amabel, too full of her delight to think of visitors or anything else but her doll, rushed up to her aunt crying,

"See! see! the New Year's gift Miss Boyle bought me. Isn't it lovely? I'll get Rosa to dress it!"

Mrs. Waters had risen.

"I think you will not find Rosa ready to dress dolls now she is promoted," she said, with a slight sneer, and turning to Miss Boyle added, "What think *you* of this conversion of a nursemaid into a shopwoman?"

"Think! That it does credit alike to the kind hearts and good sense of our friends. *Miss* Bateson" (she laid an emphasis on the "miss") "was not

"'Born to blush unseen
And waste her sweetness'—

in a nursing chair; or sit

"'Like patience on a monument,
Smiling at grief.'

Eh, Jack?" and the lively young lady turned to the boy an inquiring face full of fun, as the others departed, the one saying in an underbreath "*Miss* Bateson!" the other openly, "Well, we shall see."

"Open wide the doors, Amabel, and let us air the room," cried Miss Boyle, when they were gone. "I sniff envy and all uncharitableness in the atmosphere! Oh, Miss Jenny," she ran on, as Miss Danvers returned, "I could not help flinging my travestie at Mrs. Waters; she might have taken out a patent for beauty, she is so intolerant of every pretty face but her own. I have not forgotten the scene at the christening. She must lead that poor man of hers a pretty life."

"Don't you think Rosa will dress my doll for me now, Miss Boyle?" asked Amabel, in childish perturbation. "She used to make rag-dolls for me, and make their faces with ink, and she

twisted worsted round her knitting-needles to make curls. Don't you think she will be as good to us as she used to be?"

"Aye, that she will, child, dress dolls, and dress you, too, if you wish. She will be better than ever she was. And you'll hear her laughing and singing merrily one of these days."

"I don't think that," said wise little Jack. "I don't think she could laugh—laugh out right loud, I mean, like me and Amabel. She can cry, I know, for she cried over Amabel when she was scalded, and—and over me when—when I was naughty and tumbled downstairs. But I've seen her smile once or twice, and then she was *so* pretty—as pretty as you are, Miss Boyle." Whereat Miss Boyle laughed merrily, told Master Jack he was a little flatterer, bade him be off to the nursery with his sister and their toys, and that if they had patience they would see the Rose in bloom before long.

"I am of opinion that there is a good deal of undeveloped force in Rosa," said Miss Jenny, when they were gone. "She has wonderful powers of repression; is extremely retiring, and sensitive to a fault; but I've an idea she will make a fine woman."

"Yes, Miss Jenny; I think we shall see the Rose open in the sunshine; and you are quite right: it is sensitiveness and modesty, not bashfulness, makes her blush so frequently; whatever Mrs. Waters and Miss Fisher may think. And do you know, I've a suspicion Miss F. is afraid her line will snap and her gudgeon go swimming away

"'Neath the shade of the roses by Bendeemer's stream.'"

And as the merry young lady sang her paraphrase she nodded archly to Miss Jenny, and was off, turning back to say, "Wasn't it a treat to see the amiable satisfaction of the two ladies!"

However that might be, Mrs. Waters and Miss Fisher betook themselves straightway to Newmarket Street with the twofold object of shopping and "seeing how the artful creature comported herself behind a counter." But neither so much as hinted to the other that it was the hour when offices and warehouses poured forth their hungry inmates for the mid-day meal, or that it was possible to meet *particular* friends by the way, as many a lifted hat and bending bonnet indicated. And seeing that the

office of Mr. Waters lay in another direction, they could scarcely be supposed on the look-out for him.

Yet before they were half down the street they encountered pompous Mr. Blabroo, and with him bewhiskered Mr. Waters, who had a small paper parcel in one hand and a smirk of satisfaction on his countenance, which died out under the abrupt salutation of his better half:

"What brings *you* here? What is that?"

"That? Oh, a couple of pairs of gloves for you, my dear, as a New Year's gift," and he tendered the parcel as if it had been a peace-offering.

A smile dawned on his wife's pretty face, but the dawn was as speedily beclouded by Mr. Blabroo's incautious admission:

"Yes, we have been to patronise my brother-in-law's new shopwoman by way of encouragement to the inexperienced young lady."

"Oh!" gasped Mrs. Waters in a kind of nervous tremour. "Then it seems I shall have to thank the *new shopwoman* for the gloves! You can keep the New Year's gift!" and, with a mere inclination of the head, meant to be politely sarcastic, she swept on, leaving her husband with his hand outstretched and the parcel in it, to look after them and say to his equally astonished companion, "I say, Blabroo, you put your foot in it then. It will cost me a silk dress to put this matter straight."

"Young *lady*, indeed!" she jerked out, after a pause. "I see now what brought him so far from the office!"

"Ah, we caught him nicely, did we not?" insinuated Miss Fisher, thinking to fall in with her friend's views.

But Mrs. Waters was not to be calculated upon.

"I think, Lucy, other people are as likely to be 'caught' as my husband," she answered, snappishly. "*Your* friend Mr. Bowford has just gone in to patronise the *young lady*, or my eyes deceive me."

And surely enough when the crowded shop was reached, there was Mr. Bowford composedly waiting to be served—waiting evidently until Miss Bateson should be disengaged.

Mrs. Waters looked triumphant, Miss Fisher felt inclined to faint.

And if he really had been waiting with such intent, he was outgeneralled, Miss Fisher adroitly interposing between him and the counter, so as to take the place of an elderly lady,

whose purchase Rosa was papering up. (In those days ladies were not ashamed to be the bearers of their own parcels.) And without time for consideration, Miss Fisher asked for some out-of-the-way thing for which she had no manner of use.

Rosa's colour had risen on their entrance, and they set it down to the presence of Mr. Bowford; but they found her perfectly self-possessed, and, though she had occasionally to refer to Mr. Vaudrey respecting goods and prices, she attended to them with composure and a quiet grace they had not expected. They kept her occupied with various requirements until Mr. Bowford had no alternative but to turn to the opposite counter and ask Mrs. Vaudrey to show him some silk purses, although, if truth be told, Miss Fisher was not far out in her conjecture that he had less desire for the silk purse than for a chat with Miss Bateson as the seller.

She did not at all calculate that Miss Bateson was *not* desirous to serve the waiting gentleman.

Delighted with the success of her tactics, Miss Fisher lost no time in concluding her purchases, and contrived to expedite Mrs. Waters, so that by the time the purse was selected and paid for, they were at liberty to shake hands with Mrs. Vaudrey, and saunter out of the shop in converse with the gentleman in such a manner as to secure his attendance for some distance. Advantage was taken of the opportunity to enlist his services on more than one festive occasion during the week, Mrs. Waters improvising a supper party on the spur of the moment, for which act of impromptu generalship the married lady claimed the thanks of her friend later in the day, the twain having a mutual, if tacit understanding that a match between Mr. Bowford and Miss Fisher, though most desirable, yet needed the skilful intervention of a generous ally.

Little did they think that in their cleverness they had sent the eligible young man to Rosa Bateson as a customer on two separate occasions—first for white kid gloves, and then, as an afterthought, for a dress-tie.

But, surely, had they noted the modest reserve with which she opened parcels, laid the goods before the customers, and recommended this or that, the mantling blushes which she could not subdue, rising almost as freely at the approach of one as another, illiberal opinion would have died out or merged into respect.

Caleb Booth's Clerk.

A Lancashire Story. [Jan. 1st, 1882.]

By Mrs. G. Linnæus Banks.

"Mrs. Banks's books are generally remarkable for their accurate drawing of scenes of north-country life."—*Academy.*

"It may seem to be somewhat exaggerated commendation to say—although it is by no means too much to do so—that what Sir W. Scott did for his native land Mrs. Banks is doing for Lancashire, by clearly and cleverly showing to the world the peculiarities of a county which ranks as one of the highest importance in our country."—*Bell's Messenger.*

"Mrs. Banks's stories are good; studied and written with much honest care and with much vigour."—*British Quarterly Review.*

"The most amusing fact in the book must, we think, be a true story. There is considerable action and interest in the narrative."—*Guardian.*

"There is plot enough in 'Caleb Booth's Clerk' to furnish forth half-a-dozen ordinary novels, and these of the most thrilling description."—*John Bull.*

"A novel of no ordinary power and intellect."—*Sunday Times.*

Wooers and Winners; or Under the Scars.

A Yorkshire Story. [March 1st, 1882.]

By Mrs. G. Linnæus Banks.

"Must be recommended as an excellent novel to all who care for manlier food than *that* wherewith novelists commonly supply them."—*Graphic.*

"An extremely clever plot that has a strong and wholesome vigour in it. Mrs. Banks's writing is throughout vigorous and stirring, there is no puling sentimentality in her love passages, there is no lingering on the confines of delicate questions in her pages. Has a bracing invigorating effect upon the mind, as pleasant as it is rare."—*Lloyd's Newspaper.*

"There is no novel-writer of the present times who knows so well how to describe north-country manners and scenery. Life-like reality, tinctured with just sufficient romance to hold the reader entranced."—*Bell's Messenger.*

"Mrs. Linnæus Banks can at all times succeed in amusing, and she has not failed to do so in 'Wooers and Winners.' There is no want of incident and pleasing description."—*Examiner.*

"A fresh flavour of the time and place, Yorkshire in the early days of railway enterprise and social reform, hangs about the story; and the wanderings of her geological and botanical enthusiast, Mr. Thorpe, give the author opportunities for descriptions of the scenery and tints of local colour."—*Daily News.*

"Mrs. Linnæus Banks is doing for Lancashire and the West Riding what George Eliot has done for the Midlands. 'Wooers and Winners' must be recommended as an excellent novel."—*Graphic.*

the girl." "You're sure to repent it." "Set a beggar on horseback," &c., &c., &c., being the common cries. But little heeded those whom she served, and those she began to love. The children clung to her; Amabel, who had not been deceived in the item of doll-dressing, felt their mutual Saltwych experience a particular bond of friendliness, and long after the smart of her scalded face and neck was forgotten, and Rosa's tear and kiss of sympathy forgotten too, its influence remained. Another influence, too, she had. The child, so lectured on her hoydenish behaviour, began to look upon the composed demeanour of Rosa as a something to be admired, and, unconsciously perhaps, made her the model for her own deportment when "playing at ladies" with her companions or her dolls.

Lively Miss Boyle took very kindly to her, made her little presents occasionally—large ones would have been "respectfully declined,"—and, urging that

> "All work and no play
> Makes maidens pine away,"

would carry off Miss Bateson for a stroll out of the smoke into country fields and lanes, leave of absence rarely being denied. And under all these genial influences Rosa became a new being, as it were. Her morbid melancholy died out. She was no longer a mark for the shafts of the servants. She had gained a step in the social ladder, was more an adopted daughter than a paid assistant, and soon her cheerfulness was as marked as had been her depression, Miss Boyle adding the cap-sheaf to her harvest of contentment.

Miss Boyle was a young lady of independent means as well as independent action, who had been early left parentless to the care of a guardian who did not guard her; but she had a large heart, and her countenance went far to nullify the ill-natured observations of the envious, whilst the sunshine of her beaming countenance sent its rays into the chilled heart of Rosa, already brightened by change of scene and position. She did not forget her parents or her home, but she ceased to sorrow. Young Mr. Freeland, whose undesirable attentions had been the primary reason for leaving Saltwych, had not crossed her path again; and her only anxiety now was for the welfare of her sister, from whom she had never heard in all the eighteen months of their separation, although she had written to her repeatedly.

The previous spring, Mrs. Marbury—in Spindleton for the fashions—had said, "You would only unsettle Edda, my dear, if you went to see her;" but coming again, and hearing that, with the exception of one curt letter from Mrs. King, Rosa had heard nothing of her sister, she said it was "quite time some one looked after the child, who must be fourteen years old, if a day."

Mr. Vaudrey expressed his willingness to take Rosa to Ashtown the very next day, adding,

"I know Bowford will be glad to drive us over if I only ask him."

"Would it not be better to go by coach?" suggested Rosa, with a sudden flush.

"Why?"

"Well—er—I do not like to be under an obligation to—to—a—a—gentleman."

"Obligation! Bowford will be the one obliged, I've a notion."

"There would be more room in the coach," she urged.

"Perhaps—and less fresh air. I prefer the gig."

Rosa knew Mr. Vaudrey of old. He did not waste words when he had decided. But the present decision was utterly distasteful to her. She had seen another proposal looming in the distance for some time, and seen, moreover, with some dismay, that it had Mr. Vaudrey's full concurrence.

Nothing but her craving to see Edda would have won her assent to be driven to Ashtown by Mr. Bowford. She had never overcome her impressions on the day when Jack fell downstairs. Mr. Bowford might be in a good situation, a man in favour, likely to be taken into partnership, might be respectable and respectful, might have all good qualities with which Mr. Vaudrey accredited him, but Rosa could not see him with Mr. Vaudrey's eyes. Probably the insinuations of Ann and Bridget, and of Miss Fisher's friend, had something to do with it, but not all the young fellow's patient attention could win so much as a look of encouragement from her. Besides, there are hearts which are not to be won by mere attention and admiration, hearts which need the magnetic touch ere they can pulsate with life's strongest feeling.

As Mr. Vaudrey had said, Mr. Bowford was only too willing to place himself and gig at Miss Bateson's service. He made a special effort, and set special business aside; and if space for

three meant something of a crush, it was none the worse for that—to him.

He showed his sense of the favour in many little ways, and was in the best of spirits; but Rosa's reserve was never more apparent, and Mr. Vaudrey soon ceased to chuckle over his success.

She had another reason for silence during the return journey. She had seen her sister, but only to weep over her. Edda, the pet of her father's home, so loved, so cared for—now so evidently a drudge and a dependent, that the contrast between her own home amongst strangers and Edda's with her kin struck her painfully. But this is anticipation.

A square, sombre, red brick house with only the factory-yard between it and the cotton-mill was pointed out as the abode of the Kings. There was, however, an aspect of something more than well-to-do respectability about curtains and such fittings as were outwardly visible, which spoke pretty faithfully of an interior got up without care for the cost. "Solid, respectable, handsomely furnished, promises well," remarked Mr. Vaudrey, as the gig stopped at the door, which opened on the street without any intermediate rails or fore-court. A piano on which someone was practising drowned the approach of wheels. A passing factory-lad voluntarily knocked at the door for them, and the knock was a very mild affair. Probably had Mr. Bowford plied the knocker, his impressive business flourish might have brought a trim servant maid to answer it.

Instead, the door was opened by a thin begrimed young creature, whose hair was full of dust, and whose large dark eyes stood prominently forth, whose old black stuff frock was far too short, although the tucks had been visibly let down; and who was half-hid behind a large wrapper pinafore, which came to her feet.

"Oh, if you please, I'll call some one," said she, evidently taken aback to find a gig at the door, and a young gentleman handing a tall young lady out. "Oh, Mrs. King will be so angry. If you'll only please to wait I'll send Martha," and she was running off when Rosa, with a sort of suffocating cry, caught hold of her by the grimy hand and detained her.

"Oh! Edda, can that be you? Do you not know me?"

"What! Rosa! Oh, my dear, dear sister!" and the skinny

arms went round the other's neck, soiling and crushing an embroidered white pelerine in the contact.

But Rosa thought nothing of her pelerine, nothing of her companions; she saw only her sister and the condition she was in, and it almost broke her heart.

"Oh, Edda," she murmured, "I'm afraid Aunt King does not treat you well."

Edda looked round timorously, "Hush! Mrs. King may hear you! I mustn't call her aunt. I'm not always so dirty; but I've been riddling cinders. And you'd best let me go and send a servant—she will be so cross if she knows you have seen me."

Rosa's heart sank. Riddling cinders! and servants kept.

A servant woman, with a short-sleeved morning gown of spotted indigo print, the full borders of her white linen cap "set" on the Italian-iron in most approved order, came bustling up.

Rosa's eyes appealed to Mr. Vaudrey.

"Who did you please to want, sir? Mr. King? Mr. King is in the factory. Eh? Mrs. King? If you will please to walk into this room and sit down I will tell Missis you are waiting. What name shall I say, sir?"

"My name is Vaudrey, but Mrs. King will not know me; you had better say Miss Bateson."

It was the front room on the ground floor, apparently in ordinary occupation, well carpeted, papered, and draped. There were pictures, mirror and candelabra, rosewood furniture, in which might be included an upright piano—and an equally upright young lady seated before it. On their entrance she walked to the window and looked out.

Mr. Bowford had elected to remain with the gig—a relief to Rosa.

They were kept waiting a considerable time before Mrs. King condescended to make her appearance.

When she came in, a portly personage with much lace-cap and fluttering cap-string, and a morning-dress of the newest pattern print, she surveyed her visitors with a stare; there was a slight inclination of the head, and at length she offered her hand to Rosa, with an exclamatory,

"Dear me, how you have grown! But I think you are dressing much above your present position."

Rosa flushed painfully.

Mr. Vaudrey interposed: "Your *niece*, madam, dresses to please my wife. *We* regard her as one of our family."

"Oh, indeed, I'm glad to hear it." (She did not seem very glad of the rebuff.)

"Mr. Vaudrey has been so good as to bring me to see Edda, aunt. I have been very anxious, as I have never heard from her," said Rosa.

"Melinda (to the young lady at the window), you can tell Edda her sister is here." But Mrs. King did not say, "Here is your cousin, shake hands." It was clear the visit gave no satisfaction.

"I should have written had there been anything satisfactory to say, but between Edda's temper and her untidiness I could write nothing that was pleasant. She has been nothing but a cost and a trouble to us."

"In dress or education, madam?" put Mr. Vaudrey, dryly; and Mrs. King moved on her seat uneasily under his eye.

At that moment in came Edda with a preliminary tap at the door. There had been a hasty attempt with a wash and a brush to make herself something more presentable; but the dust was still in her hair—no hurried scrubbing would whiten hands coarse with rough work, and nothing could make the old frock she wore look as if it had been made for her.

"Dear me!" cried her aunt, in a tone of annoyance, "is it always to be the same? Could you not put a decent frock on, and make yourself respectable before you come into a room?"

"If you please, Miss Eliza would not lend me a better frock; she said this was too good for me."

Mrs. King's uplifted hands were arrested; her look was indescribable.

"You need not trouble about your niece's appearance," said Mr. Vaudrey, with sufficient meaning. "We chanced to see her in her wrapper brat when she opened the door."—He turned to Rosa. "You can take your poor sister to the window for a little chat, if Mrs. King does not object."

"Oh, I don't care where they go, not I;" and the bows on the lace cap shook as she spoke.

"I quite believe you, madam. But *I* care. I do not like to see the contrast between those two orphans. You thought Rosa overdressed. I can readily understand it now. You had better

have put your sister's child in your husband's factory and have fed and clothed her out of her own earnings—aye, or into a charity school—better than make her a servant's drudge without wages."

"What has she been say——"

"Nothing, Mrs. King—with her *lips;* but look at her hands, at her hair, at her *bones*—they tell her story. I am sorry I did not bring Rosa here earlier. I might have found a more comfortable home for the child among strangers. It is not too late now. That she is not wanted here is palpable."

Edda's pitiful tale was soon told. She had not been to school, had worked and slept with the servants, been poorly fed, was not allowed to call Mr. and Mrs. King uncle or aunt, and wore only her cousin's old clothes.

"Oh, Edda," said Rosa, "I fretted when Mrs. Vaudrey's servants were unkind to me, and thought it degradation to be a nursemaid. If I could only have suspected how much worse off you were, I should have been ashamed of myself. But never mind, Edda," she added, as Mr. Vaudrey rose to depart; "only wait until I have a home of my own, and I'll take care of you!"

The promise was vague enough, and had no special reference to any concrete idea.

And certainly a home with Mr. Bowford was not in her mind, as that individual discovered before the year was a month older.

"Well, I hope you've had a pleasant day of it," said Miss Jenny, as Rosa walked through the shop that afternoon, followed by Mr. Vaudrey, and lifting the trap passed on into the sitting-room, whatever answer she made being lost in the recoil of the spring-door.

"It might have been if we had found hospitable quarters in the King's palace. Rosa's aunt will not entertain many angels unawares," answered her brother-in-law. "We found our best welcome at an inn. But what have you in the larder, Jenny? Bowford will be back as soon as he has put up the horse and gig, and we are all as hungry as hunters. And I say, Jenny," recalling her on her way to the glass-door, "don't say anything to Rosa before us, but see what's up with the lass. She was not very lively as we went: she was tongue-tied as we came back."

She was not much more lively at the tea-table, and though

Mr. Bowford handed to her everything edible, was not to be tempted.

Cold lamb, salad, broiled chicken, potted shrimps—all disappeared before the two hungry men, but Rosa seemed to have lost her appetite as well as her tongue. She disappeared along with the tea-tray; and when curtains were drawn, candles lighted, cards brought out, and Mr. Vaudrey settled down for "a quiet game at whist," at which Rosa was to be Mr. Bowford's partner, no Rosa was forthcoming.

She had "gone down to the other shop," said Ann; "thought Missis would want her, and went out the hall door not to disturb the gentlemen."

"Dear me, if I had but known, I should have been proud to escort Miss Bateson!" ejaculated Mr. Bowford, too obtuse to perceive that she had beat a retreat from him, or that the departure by the house door had been to avoid his inevitable offer.

She was never less in a mood to accept his gallant attentions, and he never more in a mood to be, what he considered, agreeable.

Her pride and her affections had alike received a shock that day.

The worse than neglected condition of her darling sister cut her to the soul. That Mr. Bowford and Mr. Vaudrey should have seen such a deplorable proof of her aunt's inhumanity was like pouring vinegar upon the cut. Grief, pride, anger contended together in her breast, with a sense of impotence to remedy the evil.

There were no customers in the other shop when she put her foot on the low step.

Mrs. Vaudrey's pretty face lit up. "Well, Rosa, how did you get on to-day? How did you find your sister?" she asked, cheerily.

Rosa dropped into a chair outside the counter. The abrupt but kindly question broke up her reserve. "Oh, Mrs. Vaudrey," she said, and her fine eyes swam with tears, "I cannot tell you how I found her. She opened the door for us—and—and Mr. Vaudrey can tell you better than I can what she was like. She has never been sent to school, she says; she has only her cousin's worn-out clothes, is kept in the kitchen to help the servants, and seems afraid to speak. No one has a kind word for her but one of the maids, and she is not owned as a relation. It

is shocking! She had better have gone out to nurse a child as I did; she might then have made friends."

This was an unusual outburst for reticent Rosa. Voluble Mrs. Vaudrey looked at her in blank astonishment.

"Not behaved kindly to her own sister's child! Do you think it was Mr. King's doing?"

Rosa shook her head. "I am not sure; Edda scarcely named him. But, oh! Mrs. Vaudrey, what that poor child must have felt to see me coming in a gig with two gentlemen to take care of me, and to see my muslin dress and pelerine, and new leghorn bonnet, by the side of her shabby things, and she with no one to care for her!"

"It is to be hoped your aunt was ashamed of herself, and will treat her better in——"

A customer came in. Others followed. The conversation was resumed on the way home, and Mrs. Vaudrey discovered that Rosa was worrying herself how to get Edda away from her aunt's.

There was little need for Miss Jenny to ask any questions, Mrs. Vaudrey was so full of the subject when she got home. She could scarcely wait until Mr. Bowford rose to depart, which he did shortly after hearing that Miss Bateson had retired to rest.

Rosa's morbid melancholy was a thing of the past. She was always more or less composed and dignified towards strangers, and had the same tendency to blush on the smallest provocation; but in the family circle she could throw off much of her reserve, and, if not vivacious as Miss Boyle, could laugh most cheerily, showing a set of the most beautiful white teeth.

But now a fresh shadow seemed to have come over her. Miss Fisher and Mrs. Waters wondered what new artifice was hers.

These two had latterly developed a strong partiality for Miss Jenny's tea-table, and even tolerated the lesson-learning and repetition of Master Jack and Miss Amabel, having in view a sociable round game when the absentees should come home from the other shop, the children be "bundled off to bed," and perhaps Mr. Waters drop in to take them home (they were near neighbours).

They said nothing of being there to surprise and watch Mr. Bowford, though there was more or less of arch badinage flying about when such chance was afforded them. And they were

rather given to rally him on the frequency of his visits, and "the magnet of attraction," with not a few would-be-witty allusions to roses and thorns, and blushes, and so on, which he bore well enough, indeed with seeming satisfaction, but which sent the blood often enough to Rosa's forehead in an indignant flame.

They had given over sneering at Rosa's promotion, and had taken to a sort of patting on the back still more offensive to her; but the reserve and shadow which had suddenly come over her was matter for debate and speculation.

Meeting Miss Boyle in the street, they laid siege to her. Had she observed it? Did she think that there was a coolness between Miss Bateson and her admirer, Mr. Bowford. All men were fickle; it would be quite a pity if she had mistaken his politeness for anything more serious.

But Miss Boyle was not to be drawn out. She left them in a denser fog than she found them.

She had heard of the sister at an aunt's, and also of Rosa's disappointment; but she heard no particulars, and respected the reserve.

About a fortnight had gone by. Mrs. Vaudrey asked Rosa if she thought Edda would like to learn straw-bonnet making.

"Anything which would make her independent of Aunt King, and be respectable!" said Rosa, with heaving breast.

"Well, my dear, our old friends the two Miss Plants—you know the old ladies—will take her, on our recommendation, and on your account, without a premium, teach her the business and millinery as well, for the next three years, paying her what will find her in clothes and a little pocket-money. What do you think?"

What could she think? She knew the two old maids, who had been born to far other expectations, but had battled with the world, turned their unaccustomed talents towards a then most flourishing trade, and held their own in the town, respectable and respected.

She was grateful. There was another journey to Ashtown, this time without Mr. Bowford. A servant opened the door. Mrs. King, who had been so far moved by their last visit as to have a frock made to fit the child, was evidently taken by surprise. But there was less desire to part with Edda than they had anticipated. Probably the cotton-spinner's wife had no inclina-

tion to have her nieces in situations, where they could claim affinity with her.

There was no such difficulty with Mr. King. He was glad to get rid of an eyesore, and said it. He did not see why he should be expected to keep other people's children. He had no objection to provide the child with a moderate outfit to give her a start. But it must be understood clearly she had nothing more to expect from him. And he warned them that she was a most violent temper—a perfect fury.

"A worm will turn when trod upon," said Rosa, with a quiet deliberation sufficiently expressive, and Mr. King made no reply.

In another week the Ashtown coach brought an outside passenger to Spindleton, whose luggage was contained in a small trunk. Selections had been made from her cousin's stores of clothing, a seamstress having been called in to adapt old frocks to a fresh wearer. A new ribbon was bought for a dyed straw-bonnet, and the Kings took credit to themselves for the respectable manner in which they had provided for "another person's child."

At all events she was better clad than she had been for very many months, and Rosa, seeing that she was neat and clean, no longer felt the contrast a reproach.

A load was off her mind. Edda was provided for. There was no call to sacrifice herself.

CHAPTER V.

TESTED.

"MRS. VAUDREY! Mrs. Vaudrey! come here and tell me who that is in Crompton's doorway? Is he the master of the shop?"

The eager questioner was Rosa Bateson, standing between the two counters of the Newmarket Street establishment in the early morning whilst the shutters were being taken down, and pointing across the wide street to a dark handsome man, who stood without hat on a woollen draper's step; and whose age might be six or seven and twenty.

"That?—oh, that's Mr. Crompton," answered Mrs. Vaudrey, carelessly, after a glance across the road.

"Dear me! What a fine and noble face he has! Bless his curly head! That's the sort of man I should like for a sweetheart!" exclaimed Rosa, clasping her hands together in sportive admiration; which at the same time seemed to mark a strong comparison with someone else not necessary to mention.

"Him? Why, Rosa, he's married and has two children!"

"Oh!" cried she, dolorously, lifting her hands in mock dismay, then clasping them on her breast, with lugubrious sentimentality. "Oh, what a misfortune! To think the first time a poor girl sees a being she could fancy as a sweetheart, that he should be a married man! It's quite lamentable!" and with something between a laugh and a pretended fit of weeping, in which a duster did duty for a handkerchief, the bit of comedy ended.

The burlesque was an evident imitation of Miss Boyle, but quite out of character with Rosa; and she seemed struck at once with her blunder and her temerity.

But she had set Mrs. Vaudrey's tongue in motion, and before the dusting process was over she was in full possession of Archibald Crompton's history, his rise and progress, in which, however, the hearer declared she had lost all interest since he was a married man. Indeed, if we might judge from the crimson on brow and neck, which her lace chemisette could not hide, Rosa was heartily ashamed of her unwonted demonstration, and seemed only afraid lest her jest should be taken in earnest.

Of this there seemed some danger, Mrs. Vaudrey making merry over it at home, after business hours ; but after a little banter, which discomposed Rosa not a little, the matter dropped.

It so happened about this time that some enterprising individual or individuals conceived the brilliant idea of adding to the many glories of Spindleton a permanent bazaar, for the sale of fancy and other wares and the general advancement of trade. It was built on a scale to outrival the famous Soho Bazaar, and in proximity to the fashionable promenades which it was expected to supersede.

Its erection caused no little stir in the town. There was a general rush of shopkeepers to hire counters, and no small heartburning lest rival traders should obtain the best situations; though not a few of the steady-going grumbled at what they maintained was "just an expensive whim-wham, likely to be more cost than profit." So said James Vaudrey ; but his wife was so afraid lest the bazaar should eclipse the shops, and all the fashionable trade go thither, that, as he averred " for peace and quietness," he became one of the stall-holders, though he said, " I'm afraid, Emilia, like Benjamin Franklin, we shall pay too dear for our whistle."

That he was right was proved in the sequel. In advance all was bustle, preparation, and anticipation. There were new goods to be laid in, glazed lock-up cases provided, and other fittings, salesmen and women engaged, and then came a note of alarm—the fine square building would not be ready to time. Ready or not, it was opened, and the opening made quite a gala with the music and pomp of a military band, although the walls were not dry from the plasterers, half the counters were incompletely furnished, and the process of unpacking and laying out still going on.

It was a gala day to Amabel and Jack, who, arrayed in their best bib and tucker, had been granted a holiday on the occasion, and who thought it good fun to run to and fro between shop and bazaar with messages and parcels of goods forgotten or wanted ; quite a gala to the crowd of gaily-dressed loungers who, like Jack and Amabel, came to see the show of which they made a part.

It was no such gala to the flurried stall-keepers, who were only half prepared, and who scarcely knew where to find the goods for which they were asked ; and it was no gala to Rosa Bateson,

who, apart from the publicity of the situation, the constant demands on her attention from purchasers or triflers, the frequent "Rosa, where's that?" or "Rosa, where's the other?" of busy Mrs. Vaudrey, became unpleasantly sensible that people, not customers, lingered in front of their stall and blocked the way, that eyeglasses were lifted and levelled at her face by vulgar men, and echoes of her name floated to her ears, coupled with expressions of admiration and epithets which set those ears tingling, and the crimson flag of insulted delicacy fluttering in her face.

Lovely she was, without question. Tall, symmetrical, graceful, with a natural dignity born of pride and modesty—the promise, clouded by melancholy at sixteen, more than fulfilled at eighteen. Yet few of those who gazed at her with unconcealed admiration guessed how her sensitive soul shrank from such notice.

There are men who think that because a girl stands behind a counter she is a fair target for the shafts of wit or insolence; and fifty years ago the tide of refinement had barely set in. Never before had Rosa occupied so exposed a situation, never before had she been so much annoyed.

Her annoyance reached a climax when Felix Freeland, of Saltwych Priory, approached the stall with Mrs. Ashworth on his arm. The old lady—a regular customer of the Vaudreys—stopping to say a pleasant word, wondered not more at her nephew's eagerness to pay for any article she might select, than at the burning flush on Rosa's forehead, or her unwonted reserve and monosyllabic answers when he spoke, addressing her as "Miss Bateson."

Answering his aunt's look of surprise, he observed, jauntily,

"Oh, Miss Bateson and I are old acquaintances. We were friends in Saltwych."

"I think you are mistaken, sir. I formed no indiscriminate friendships in Saltwych or elsewhere," was said with a touch of hauteur, in which, he said to himself, there was more of the Batesons of Wych-Mount than he had expected after the damsel's sudden descent to a tradesman's nursery: a fact which he had been at the pains to establish.

"A very proper, well-behaved young person that," observed Mrs. Ashworth, as she bore her reluctant nephew away. "I hope you, Felix, never treated her with disrespect."

"Disrespect! Not I. I was extra polite to the—the girl, and she was barely civil to me in return, the haughty jade!" he muttered between his teeth.

His aunt sighed. She had an inkling that her nephew's very notice was disrespect to a modest girl, and she said so. Whereat he laughed.

"At all events," said Mrs. Ashworth, "you do not seem to have impressed her in your favour."

"No! Egad! but I'm not easily daunted, and am not to be snubbed by a girl behind a counter, be her ancestors who they may."

"Oh, Felix!" remonstrated his aunt, "a girl behind a counter may be as pure in heart as your sisters in the Priory, and surely her defenceless position should awaken the chivalry of a man's nature, not his base and selfish passions."

Another annoyance that gala-day brought Rosa. A dinner in honour of the occasion was held at a neighbouring hotel. As the stall-keepers, thoroughly wearied out, were clearing away and locking up cases before departure, Mr. Bowford came up, and, as if he were the bearer of some gratifying intelligence, asked Miss Bateson if she knew she had "been toasted with 'three times three' as the 'lovely Blush-Rose of the Bazaar' by the gentlemen at the dinner."

"I did not think *gentlemen* could be so rude or insulting," was all her comment; and Mr. Bowford felt abashed. The adulation which might have turned a weaker girl's head wounded *her* self-respect, and he saw it.

Poor Jacob Bowford! Never moth singed his wings at a flame more persistently. He did not seem able to comprehend the finality of Rose's quiet "No;" but hovered about her after his business hours with a sort of self-complacent belief in the old adage, "Nine nay-says are half a grant," excessively annoying to her.

For much of this Mr. Vaudrey was answerable. "Much wooing will win any woman," he maintained. He had won his own wife on that assumption, and aired his dogma in the ears of young Bowford as encouragement when he found him smarting under a first refusal; and if the wooing did not progress as satisfactorily as these two could have wished, it was not for lack of opportunities afforded by the head of the Vaudrey household, or of commendations of the suitor, in season and out of season. Then a little self-complacent belief in his own merits and

attractions—fostered by Miss Fisher—might have something to do with Mr. Bowford's pertinacity. Certain it is there was always an escort home for Mrs. Vaudrey and Miss Bateson from the bazaar at night, a stay for supper or a game of cards at Mr. Vaudrey's table.

Then, when Mr. Bowford rose to get his hat, it would be "Rosa, show Mr. Bowford to the door;" and however reluctance might be visible in her face, she never ventured an open refusal of any direct order from her generous friend. When possible, she made an early escape to her own room to avoid what she regarded as "persecution," though nothing could possibly be more respectful or deferential than the manner of her so-called "persecutor," whose very addresses were the outcome of esteem for her modesty and reserve.

And no doubt she would have been on the very best of good terms with him as a friend but for the early insinuations of Ann and Bridget, the later ones of Mrs. Waters and Miss Fisher, or even if he had not sought from her more than friendship. But love would not come, either at his bidding or on Mr. Vaudrey's encouragement.

There were other "persecutors" who had no such sanction for their advances—some who presumed on her supposed defenceless position, and against these offended modesty could only raise the ægis of reserve and self-respect. The bazaar, as predicted, became the fashionable promenade and lounge, and not a few of those loungers whiled away their time turning over trifles on the different counters, and talking flippant or inane nonsense to the young women behind them.

Of these none attracted more attention than the "Blush Rose," and the Vaudreys gathered a harvest in consequence. The epithet, by whomsoever applied, had clung to her. An anonymous bouquet of blush roses (it was summer time) came so addressed to her the morning after the dinner; two more were offered to her in the course of the day, jellies and sweets brought to her from the confectionery counter, but unless the presenter was a lady, Miss Bateson only curtseyed and begged "leave most respectfully to decline." If pressed, her answer was invariably, "I cannot accept gifts from gentlemen." After a time rings, lockets, and other trinkets were brought or sent, but they as surely went back to the sender.

There were assistants at other counters less scrupulous

who regarded her with envy, wished they "had her chances," and voted her "squeamish" and "stuck-up," but their opinions and expostulations did not change her conduct.

Even Mrs. Vaudrey argued with her one evening (when a fine bouquet of exotics thus rejected had been offered to Mrs. Vaudrey and brought home). "I think, Rosa, you are too particular; anyone may accept a floral offering."

"Not anyone in my position, Mrs. Vaudrey. The very perfume of a flower is a delight to me; but as to accept or reject *one* gift would be to favour or insult some individual, I must either accept or reject *all*. I prefer the latter. I have had such things offered, as you know, by men whose admiration, on your own admission, was contaminating;" and the light of insulted purity shone in her eye and on her cheek.

"Rosa is quite right," said Miss Jenny, stoutly. "What think you, Miss Boyle?" that lady being present.

"I agree with you and Rosa. It is easier to keep a door closed against all comers than to close it when once opened, and the presumption of some men is incredible."

Amongst the most assiduous of Miss Bateson's professed admirers, and Mrs. Vaudrey's most profitable customers, was Felix Freeland, who apparently spent more time with the Ashworths in Spindleton than with his parents at the Priory, and more money at her counter than the latter might have approved.

But Rosa remembered that good Mrs. Marbury had sent her from Saltwych out of this very man's reach, and she remembered, too, the freedom of his addresses when her youth, her inexperience, her recent misfortunes and orphanhood should have been her protection.

He had a free-and-easy friend, a certain Jack Lawless, who was not a whit behind him in attempts to flatter the "Blush Rose;" but after she told him that "a compliment to the face was an insult to the understanding," and his mute stare of surprise, she never heard a fulsome word or had a free glance from him.

Felix Freeland was not so easily rebuffed or put down. He had laid heavy bets on "plucking the 'Blush Rose' in spite of the thorns," but he made no progress, though weeks and months went by.

If she saw him in the distance she would call Mrs. Vaudrey to

the rescue, or turn her back, and either look out of a window behind their counter or busy herself arranging fancy goods in the cases on the walls.

"You need not turn round, Miss Bateson," said he, bitterly, on one of these occasions. "I know your back as well as your face."

She turned, and making a profound curtsey said, "Thank you, sir. It is the first compliment you have paid me."

"Confound her impudence!" he muttered, as he turned away; "but I dare say she is right. If I were only a marrying man I might——" But here his cogitations became complex and silent. A few days later a small parcel was left on the counter, addressed to "Miss Bateson." It contained a valuable gold watch and chain (at that time a lady's gold chain was nearly a yard-and-a-half long), in a velvet-lined case, and the card of Mr. Felix Freeland, begging its acceptance.

Without a second glance at the tempting gift she reclosed the parcel. On Mr. Freeland's next appearance she handed the packet to him, with the remark, "I think, sir, you addressed this and left it here by mistake."

"Oh, dear, no, Miss Bateson, I purchased it for you. Pray honour me by its acceptance," and there was a something new in his tone, a something born of higher appreciation.

"You have made a mistake, I assure you, sir. I accept no gifts from strangers."

"You surely do not consider *me* a stranger, Miss Bateson. Did you not know me when you were a child at Wych-Mount?"

"Certainly, sir, we *are* strangers. I am not Miss Bateson of Wych-Mount. I said you had made a mistake.—Bullion tassels? Yes, madam. What colour?" She turned to serve a lady, and he was forced to beat a retreat.

He left the watch and chain behind him on the counter.

That evening the packet, re-addressed by Mr. Vaudrey, was left at Dr. Ashworth's for the owner—Mr. Felix Freeland.

As the butterfly season began to wane so did the bazaar. Only irresistible bonnets could be displayed there, and when "the rainy season" necessitated less perishable apparel, the wearers discovered that the bazaar contained nothing that could not be as readily obtained from the shops. The stall-keepers had long discovered that the moisture from the wet

walls had been drawn out in vapour by the heat, only to condense at night, and destroy their more delicate goods. The Vaudreys complained that gloves mildewed, silk fringes and tassels faded, steelpurse fittings, meshes, and needles rusted, and the sale was no longer brisk.

One by one the counters were given up. Mrs. Vaudrey, who had contracted rheumatism in the damp, went back to the Newmarket Street shop, leaving Rosa and a boy in sole charge.

In a few days Mrs. Ashworth called on Mrs. Vaudrey in some concern. "Mrs. Vaudrey," said she, "are you not afraid to trust a lovely girl like Miss Bateson in so exposed a position by herself, so open to temptation?"

"Mrs. Ashworth, I could trust Miss Bateson *any*where!"

"It's more than I'd have said for any of my daughters," replied the old lady, "and I think you cannot see the risk."

They did see the risk very shortly, though not such as Mrs. Ashworth implied.

The stock was removed, and the failing bazaar abandoned. Mrs. Vaudrey was cramped with rheumatism, and Rosa was at death's door with a quinsy, the result of damp walls.

Miss Jenny had quite her hands full, but Ann and Bridget were as anxious to wait on Miss Bateson now as they had formerly been antagonistic.

"She's a good lot o' pride, but she's summat to be proud on!" observed the former to her colleague, as they saw the nursemaid develop into a tall, lovely woman, as modest and ladylike as she was beautiful, and her illness called up kindliness from the very depths of remorse.

Amabel was distracted, patient Jack was dismayed, Mr. Bowford was anxious and restless, Miss Boyle came in a cheerful volunteer to nurse the patient, and seemed to bring hope in her train.

Still Rosa lingered—grew worse; there was some talk downstairs of Mr. Vaudrey fetching Edda, so doubtful was her sister's condition, whilst Miss Boyle upstairs, to keep up the sick girl's spirit, began to mimic Jacob Bowford's lugubrious voice and woe-begone aspect in asking, "Is Miss Bateson any better to-day?" and did it so ludicrously that Rosa's risible faculties were excited; the effort to laugh broke the quinsy, and when the doctor came to lance it in the morning he found her, half famished, almost devouring boiled chicken.

There had been another inquirer during her illness—one not less anxious than Mr. Bowford, though he was answered more curtly, and that was Mr. Felix Freeland.

He hung about the place, and added materially to the exchequer of Bridget for the freshest news from the sick chamber.

And no sooner was Rosa pronounced convalescent than the wild young man, somewhat sobered and steadied, sought out Mr. Vaudrey, and expressing the utmost regret for anything he might have said or done to hurt Miss Bateson's feelings in time past, and the depth of his respect and esteem for her character, which had wrought a corresponding change in him, made her, through Mr. Vaudrey, a formal offer of his hand, and produced a letter to prove that it was with his father's sanction.

In this letter old Squire Freeland admitted that he should be glad to see his son settled; and from what he had heard of Miss Bateson from his sister Mrs. Ashworth, he thought the young lady likely to exercise a steadying influence on him. That the young man had a good heart, and so on, and that now he had "sown his wild oats," he would, no doubt, make a good husband. He might have demurred to the position of the young girl, had she been other than Miss Bateson; but he had known the Batesons of Wych-Mount in their prosperous days, and had a thorough respect for the family. He should be happy to receive Miss Rosa as a daughter.

"Um!" quoth James Vaudrey to his wife, "Bowford's nose is put out of joint now, or I'm no prophet. The lass is ambitious, and will snap at the chance of being mistress of Saltwych Priory."

But Rosa did not "snap at the chance." She "declined the honour," much as she had declined Mr. Freeland's golden gifts. His "respect" for her could not teach her to respect him. Someone quoted the proverb about "reformed rakes," but Miss Boyle and Rosa were one in the opinion that "reformed rakes could *not* make the best husbands," and Rosa could never overcome her early contempt for her long-legged persecutor.

Mr. Bowford was not any nearer winning her either, though, *according to Miss Boyle*, he had been the means of saving her life.

And now, on the first day of her return to business, Rosa going leisurely down Newmarket Street in the forenoon,

observed a shutter up at each window of the opposite woollen-draper's.

"Mrs. Vaudrey," said she, curiously, "who is dead at Crompton's? The shutters are up. Do you think it is his wife?"

Mrs. Vaudrey looked up. "Dear me, so they are! I shouldn't wonder; she has been ailing a long while. If she is gone, what will become of her poor children?"

Mr. Vaudrey came in. "I say, Emilia, I've just heard that Archibald Crompton's wife's dead. It will be a sad blow to him."

If Rosa was unusually thoughtful that day, Mrs. Vaudrey attributed it to the languor of recent illness; and no doubt justly.

Strange to say, that evening Mr. Crompton, who had never entered the shop before, though he had met Mr. Vaudrey occasionally, walked in and began, "Mrs. Vaudrey, you will have heard of my loss; and such a loss! It is irreparable! Well, misfortunes never come singly. My little boy is ill now, and I do not know how he should be treated. You are a family woman; perhaps you can tell me what should be done?"

"Nay, Mr. Crompton, I am more of a business than a family woman. My sister Jenny is more of a doctor and a nurse than I am. Our roads lie in the same direction. If you will walk home with us to-night, Jenny will soon tell you what to do."

He professed himself grateful, raised his hat from his curly head, and was gone, without so much as a look at the other counter, where curious Rosa was standing "all ears and eyes," as Mrs. Vaudrey afterwards remarked.

Closing time brought Mr. Crompton across. He was introduced to Miss Bateson by Mr. Vaudrey, who, patting her on the shoulder before looking up, said, "She has only just given the undertaker the slip, and is but a white Rose at present, this adopted daughter of ours; but we hope to see the roses bloom again ere long."

The gas was out, or they might have been seen in full bloom even then when Mr. Crompton looked up at her. Red roses or white were equally lost in the shade of her long-poked cottage bonnet, as Mr. Vaudrey, pocketing the keys, cried, "Come, Rosa, take my arm for a crutch. Mr. Crompton will take

charge of Mrs. V.," and in less than fifteen minutes they were in Older Street, stating Mr. Crompton's dilemma to the presiding genius.

"My poor dear wife" said he, "did not belong to this part of the country, and indeed had no female relations to be with her; and as she was but delicate and very retiring made no friends among neighbours. She has had no one with her except a servant, whose good-will does not compensate for her ignorance, and myself in the few hours I could spare from business. I hired a nurse at first, but she drank, made mistakes in medicines, and I had to dismiss her!"

"Dear me!" cried Miss Jenny. "Two motherless children left to the care of an ignorant servant! The boy ill, and your wife lying dead in the house! Dear me, dear me! If I could only leave the shop I would go up in the morning and see what really is the matter."

"I can take your place, Miss Jenny," put in Rosa, modestly, her colour rising as she spoke.

"It is very kind of you, really," said Mr. Crompton, addressing one or both, "especially as I am comparatively a stranger."

He was not a stranger long. Miss Jenny prescribed homely and immediate remedies for the sick boy; saw him the next morning, found him worse than she had anticipated, sent for a doctor on her own responsibility, and did not quit the little fellow again the few days he lingered.

The little girl she had sent in her father's care to keep Bessy, Jack, and Amabel company. They received her with glee, unawed by her black frock, but that and the child's motherlessness struck a vibrating cord in Rosa's breast. She petted, nursed, and comforted the child, and so won her way into its heart that when the two funerals were over, and Mr. Crompton would have taken Miss Elsie home to his lonely hearth, she clung to her new friend, and with tears entreated to "stay with pitty Mit Rota an' Amabel."

A longer stay was permitted. Indeed it seemed cruel to send her home where there would be no one to keep her company through the live-long day. However, when she did go home at the end of a month she was sent to a day-school at Miss Jenny's suggestion, as much for childish companionship as improvement. But three or four times during her stay, Mr. Crompton called to

see how she got on, sometimes walking home with the Vaudreys at night, but generally on Sundays after church.

The friendly intercourse thus commenced did not break off with the immediate occasion. Miss Elsie went home, and to school, but when her father found the house unusually dull on Sunday afternoon he would tell Elsie to run and have her things put on and he would take her out. The walks generally ended in Older Street, and became so frequent that patient Mr. Bowford, still dancing attendance on an unresponsive maiden, began to frown and run his hand through his sandy hair in a sort of desperation.

There was no doubt in *his* mind that if he were weighed in the balance with Mr. Crompton the scale would go down heavily in favour of the latter, not merely in personal appearance, in worldly means, but in the higher qualities of soul and intellect.

Now and then Edda, wonderfully improved, was one of these Sunday visitors—and so the months went by.

The widower, whose home had been desolate for over a year, walked home one evening with the Vaudreys, and offered his arm to Miss Bateson—not to Mrs. Vaudrey—for the walk. This was not unusual, but, greatly to the surprise of the latter, Rosa took the proffered arm, and apparently accepted conversation. To no other young gentleman had so much been conceded. Perhaps she did not regard the widowed father of two children as a young man. At all events he was other than Mr. Bowford, whom she was apt to answer in monosyllables, and who had fain been content with a walk home by her side unattached.

That young gentleman had of late thought to pique Miss Bateson into jealousy by an occasional display of attention to Miss Fisher, who, having discovered that her recalcitrant swain had found the Blush Rose somewhat thorny, professed contrition for her rash judgment, and outdid Miss Boyle in demonstrative good-will towards her rival. Her good-will, however, did not prevent her making the most of Mr. Bowford's flirtation.

He might have spared his pains. He only entangled himself in Miss Fisher's net, without moving Rosa in the least.

It was anything but pleasant to encounter the handsome and well-to-do widower at the Vaudrey's night after night, where Miss Boyle protested "the two men glared at each other, and would have fought for the lady's smile had not duelling gone out

of fashion." And it was in what he thought a spirit of retaliative independence that he offered tickets for concerts and flower-shows to Miss Fisher, hardly counting the consequences.

At length—when even Mr. Vaudrey could say, "I say, Bowford, I'm afraid Rosa will slip through your fingers. Crompton seems likely to cut you out"—he determined once more to bring matters to a crisis, and he did.

Rosa's perception had measured Mr. Bowford from the first; he was shallow, self-satisfied, deficient in generous impulse. She put him to the proof.

"I am sorry, sir, you could not take my first answer as final. It might have spared us both some annoyance. And, Mr. Bowford, you may not be aware that whoso marries me must find a home also for my sister Edda. I scarcely think you are prepared to do that."

Prepared! he looked petrified. "A girl without a penny stipulating that a man should so burden himself! Nay, nay; men might go distracted over a pretty face and modest ways, but keep a sister as well as a wife, that was too much of a good thing! Better have stuck to Lucy Fisher, who could put a gold frame round her pretty face!" he thought to himself.

His departure was more abrupt than dignified, and Rosa was called to account by Mr. Vaudrey for his sudden exit.

"Mr. Bowford had not calculated on making a home for my sister as well as for myself," was all her reply.

"Oh, that's it, is it? But will your new admirer be more generous, Rosa?" questioned Mr. Vaudrey.

"Yes!" faltered Rosa, her cheeks as rosy as her name.

Down went Mrs. Vaudrey's patchwork and Miss Jenny's spectacles.

"Then it's all settled!" was the simultaneous cry.

"Yes; I have promised to be a mother to his little girl, and he has promised to be a brother to Edda."

"Ah!" said Mrs. Vaudrey, "that was love at first sight."

"Nay," corrected Miss Jenny, "I think pity had as much to do with it as love. She was sorry for the lonely little orphan, sorry for the forlorn widower. If a curly head could have won her, Felix Freeland would have stood a better chance."

"Well, Crompton has shown himself more generous than Bowford without doubt. But when's it to come off, Rosa?"

"Oh, not for a long while yet;" and she blushed with a new

feeling. "Though Archy says he is very weary of his empty home."

And so, in less than another year, the sweet Blush Rose was transplanted to new soil, to bloom, if possible, with fairer grace. Years added dignity to her bearing, matronhood added a charm to her beauty, and deepened her husband's affection ; the modest delicacy which had been her chief characteristic and brought her so many admirers as a maiden, winning her, as a wife, universal respect and esteem. Even Amabel, to whom the wedding was an event, was proud to take her as an example, and never forgot her saying that "Modesty was the fairest jewel in a woman's crown."

THE END.

APPENDIX.

I have made a practice of adding an appendix to my stories, my intention being, in a measure, to prove that fact is at the base of fiction, and that the more incredible is frequently the most true. The incident on which *More than Coronets* was founded, namely, the whirling of a young child from one vessel to another by the wind during a storm, was related to me by a respected north-country friend in "North Crescent" as an actual occurrence, of which he offered to obtain the full particulars. I made a note in my pocket-book at the time, but I contented myself with the truthfulness of the bare fact, and invented "the particulars."

The scene at the fire is true even in detail, as is also the consequent persistence of the rescued heiress to marry her preserver—in that case an unknown fireman.

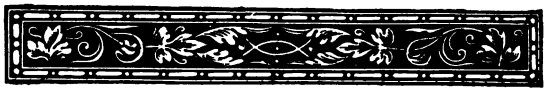
A family slightly known to me in my girlhood lost and recovered a will, and with it a valuable property, in the manner I have related.

For Hesba I had a living model, whom I hold in high esteem.

Dinah, too, had her prototype; who trimmed her bows and looked calmly defiant whilst her master's son (who had impaled himself on a pallisade) lay white before her, bleeding, as it were, to death from a wound dangerously close to the femoral artery. She was equally cool in appropriating the booted sovereign; and her after effrontery is not exaggerated.

Of the "Blush Rose" I have only to say, in stereotyped phrase, that it is "founded on fact."

ISABELLA BANKS.



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[From the *Manchester Examiner and Times.*]

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"I might have been." Oh, sad suggestive words,
So full of hidden meaning, yet so vain!
How sadly do they sound on memory's chords,
And waken feelings of regretful pain!
I might have been a wiser, better man,
With signs of well-won honour on my brow,
Had I adhered to Nature's simple plan,
Or reasoned with myself as I do now.
True, that my life has been with ills beset—
Early neglect, and poverty and gloom,—
Within those shades—how well remembered yet—
My mind found neither sustenance nor room;
Yet, with instinctive longing for the right,
It sought for fitting food, and struggled towards the light.

Among the many tragic histories of poets' lives, none could be more utterly sad than John Critchley Prince's last years, when he could no longer find sufficient employment by his reed making to keep soul and body together, and even begged postage stamps to send appeals to friends for money, and was glad to earn a few shillings by writing rhyming advertisements for an Ashton tailor. It is a marvel that during such a life, among such unsympathetic surroundings and such sordid domestic influences, so much bright and musical verse should have been written; poetry, indeed, which gives the author so high a place among our local poets. The contrast between the poet's life and his works is a terrible proof of the degrading power of intemperance, and of the poet's weakness of will. Wigan, Blackburn, Long Millgate, and Hyde are the scenes of the great part of Prince's life; therefore, surely no poet has stronger local

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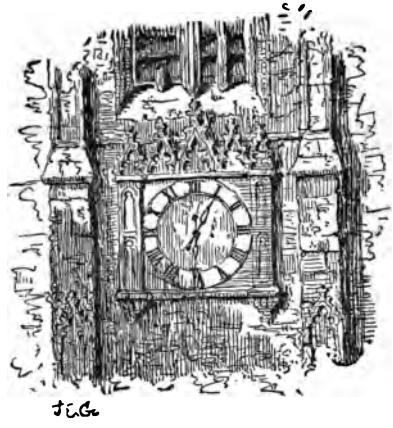

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